

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

JULY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

● TINHORN KING OF THE U.P. TRAIL

by DEE LINFORD

TWO NOVELETTES

● DEATH WAITS ON THE PAPAGO

by HARRY F. OLMSTED

● THE DRIFTER MAKES A HAND

by FRED GIPSON

● BLACKBURN ● SMALL ● BLOODHART ● LEWIS

● WINDAS ● KJELGAARD ● COLLINS



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
JULY 9TH

VOLUME XXI

JULY, 1943

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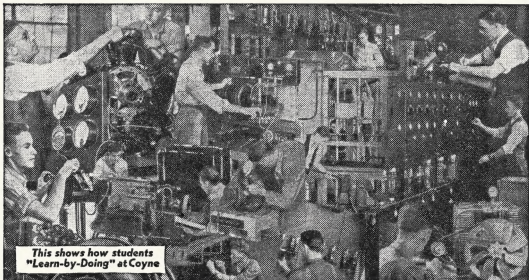
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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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A TEXAN TRANSLATES

FRED GIPSON, the Texas writing man, and author of "The Drifter Makes A Hand," in this issue as well as many other fine stories you've read in this magazine, was recently handed—what we thought—a hard nut to crack. It all started with a letter from E. T. Harris, one of our readers in Middletown, Conn. We thought the letter would be of interest to you folks, as maybe some of you puzzled about the same word. Anyway, here it is.

Dear Editor:

I am a regular subscriber to your magazine and think it is tops. I ran across one story in particular, "Come And Get It, Lawdog!" by Fred Gipson in the February issue and found he had one word that got me down—"piloncillo." I can't find the definition of it. Perhaps you can help me. Thanking you in advance, I am

Yours respectfully,

E. T. Harris,
144 Peart Street,
Middletown, Conn.

Well, we passed it on to Fred Gipson. He answered with the following letter, and was thoughtful enough to send us a copy to print in case any other of you folks were snagged by the word.

Dear Mr. Harris:

Don't let the word *piloncillo* get you down. Go buy yourself a package of brown sugar and you'll have it.

Or maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe the word does not refer to the sugar itself, but to the special cone shape into which Mexicans like to mold the unrefined ribbon-cane sugar. Spanish is a tricky language in some ways; you have to watch it. Start trying to translate literally, and the first thing you know you're all tangled up in your own loop.

For instance, the juice that has just come out of a cane press, ready for cooking into syrup or sugar, the Mexicans like to call *agua miel*, "honey water." One taste of that juice, and you know they've called the turn. At the same time, that still doesn't tell a man it's cane juice he's drinking.

When I was just a patch-seated kid here at Mason, my dad used to take me to town on Saturdays. We spent a lot of time in E. Lemburg's general store, where a man could buy groceries, saddle girths, plow points or ladies' ready-to-wear. While the old man swapped range talk, I invariably made it back to the *piloncillo* bin and

snatched a couple of the dark sticky cones. With one in each fist, I was thus fortified for the day.

Then along came "progress." E. Lemburg's changed to strictly a clothing store. There was no more *piloncillo*. I'd almost forgotten it. Then about three years ago, I was prowling down a market street in Monterey, Mex. and right out in the dust and flies I ran across the same old pine-plank bin, heaped with the dark sweet cones. I turned up at the hotel slightly ill that night and the wife told me that I ought to know better than to mix my drinks.

You know how women are!

Glad you liked my yarn.

Sincerely yours,

Fred Gipson.

Thank you, Fred Gipson.



In the next issue Fred Gipson will be with us again with another of his colorful border stories. He calls it "Way For a Ranger! It's about Ransome Vesper, a bantam ranger with a full-grown grouch. And there was cause for that grouch.

Ranger Vesper drew the assignment to investigate a cattle rustling complaint made by "some old man-killing she with a whiplash tongue." Vesper started off his investigation in great shape. For, ten miles out in strange country, he discovered that he'd forgotten his smoking matches, had unknowingly hired a pesky bucking horse, and that he'd torn a big hole in his brand-new pants.

A good start—and very human! That's Fred Gipson every time. His stories are of people you know and can understand, people you rub elbows with every day. People who make you choke up a little, or laugh loud and hearty.

There's drama, fun, and lightning action a-plenty in "Way For a Ranger!"

Also, in the next issue, there's "Gun-Runners' Graveyard," by Tom Roan—a powerful story of an ill-fated Missouri steamboat; its tough, treacherous crew; its hard-case, trigger-quick passengers...

William R. Cox tells of "Glory For The Brave." And there's other novelettes and shorts by Blackburn, Lewis, Manners, Kjelgaard, Fox, Sands and Rush. The August issue will be published July 9th.

The Editor.

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME?

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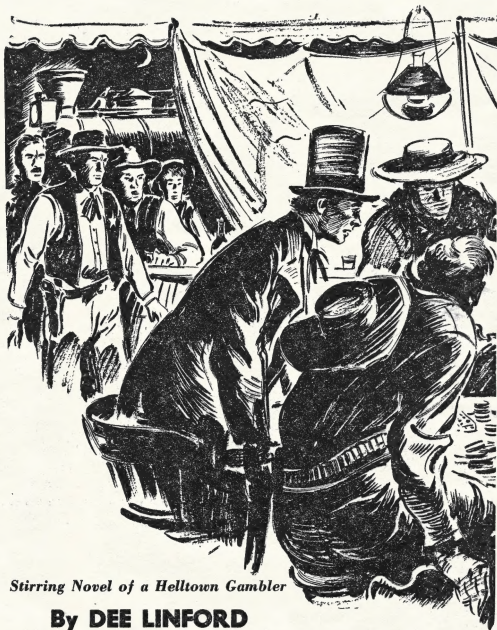
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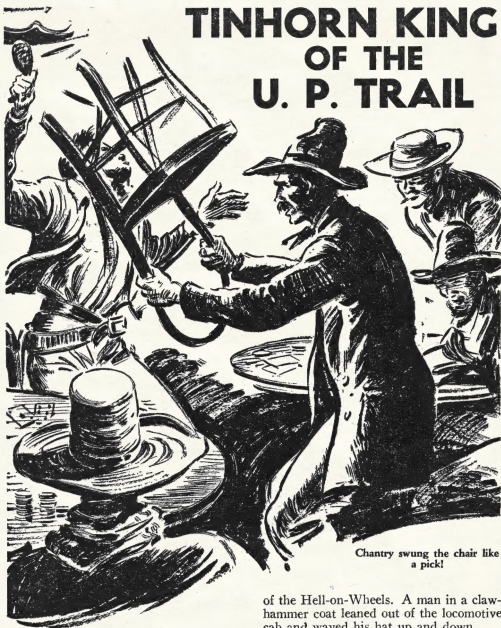


Stirring Novel of a Helltown Gambler

By DEE LINFORD

A jailbird and a broken-down tinhorn, Chantry found his grown son a top-string gentleman gambler, following his father's footsteps toward the graveyard of broken men. . . . It was then that Chantry knew he must play out the most ruthless hand he'd ever held—against the son he loved more than life. . . . A vividly dramatic story of the Bearcat towns that followed the U. P. Trail.

TINHORN KING OF THE U. P. TRAIL



Chantry swung the chair like a pick!

CHAPTER ONE

Train to Helltown

THE freight train wheezed into Bearcat. The engineer set his brakes, and a clanging jolt ran backward through the long line of cars—flat-cars carrying rails, ties, portable shanties, and all the population and paraphernalia

of the Hell-on-Wheels. A man in a claw-hammer coat leaned out of the locomotive cab and waved his hat up and down.

"Howdy, Bearcatters!" his voice carried up to Chantry, above the noise of the crowd. "We've brung you a town!"

The crowd yelled and whistled, and a beerhall band tooted to commemorate the occasion. The train disgorged its motley human cargo, and another shacktown was born, at the end of track.

Soon the rails would be laid another thirty or forty miles across the burned

prairie cheat grass, and the town would be piled back onto the cars and moved on to flame briefly elsewhere—leaving another trash-littered scar on the desert behind. But, in the meantime, the lid was off, and Bearcat would split its wooden seams on the big monthly payroll.

"The train to Helltown arrives," the fat man with the little black bag commented. "On time."

Chantry grunted, his eyes on the town. And the ghost of a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

The road could be the Great Northern, the Kansas Pacific, the Colorado and Southern or the U. P., but the terminal town remained the same. The same rows of frail, weather-blistered tarpaper shacks erected by advance grading crews ahead of the rails—standing insults to the prairie winds. The same canvas saloons and honkatonks thrown up overnight to soak up the money in the richest town in the territory. A few sturdy cabins made of condemned ties. Tents. Some with boarded-up sides. Some just tents. Whole families living in wagon-boxes set onto the ground.

The same odors, even, boiling up from it in the breathless heat of afternoon. And Chantry inhaled deeply, smelling the full smell of Bearcat. It wasn't Eau de Cologne. But it was sweet compared to the dry rot and mould that had been in his nostrils for ten years. And Chantry breathed it in, gratefully.

Dropping his bag to the ground when the train had fully stopped, Chantry climbed down from the lumber car he had ridden from Lonetree, last terminal town before Bearcat. He didn't bother to take leave of the fat man with the little black bag—the man who posed as a drummer and was no drummer at all. But the fat man had stuck to him like a burr ever since the train had left Lonetree, and was not easily shaken.

"You'll find me at the Brown Palace—" the fat man called after him "—if you change your mind."

Chantry picked up his bag and turned away without replying. He didn't plan to change his mind. He was in Bearcat to see his kid, and he was stepping wide of trouble.

He walked rapidly to lose himself in the

milling, jubilant crowd. Once again Bearcat was a part of Cheyenne and Julesburg and Abilene, and every other railroad terminal town he'd ever seen. The same off-shift laborers and painted women and Indians in bright colors. The same quiet-faced gamblers and big-bellied promoters who'd sell you a gold mine or an oil well, or give you a bargain on a piece of worthless ground they didn't own. The same cowhands and dust farmers, and settlers' wives and children with tired, solemn faces. The same big-top gambling emporium humping up like a circus tent in the middle of it all—the railroad company's bid for its own share of the easy wealth it had created.

For a moment, Chantry was a part of it all again. He walked straighter through the ankle-deep dust, almost young again. Then a shadow, black and hulking, fell across him as something dark and impenetrable wheeled between him and the setting sun. Chantry halted abruptly, warned by something he felt and did not at first see. The shifting crowd broke against him and closed in again, impatiently, like water around driftwood wedged in a shallow.

Chantry realized that he'd expected this meeting. But that didn't ease the jolt of seeing Big John Asper's heavy, brooding face bearing down on him.

A moment dragged in silence, with neither man speaking nor looking away. Then Asper hooked his thumbs into his gun belt, and spat at the dust by Chantry's feet.

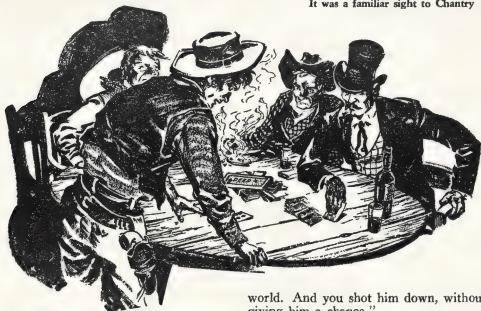
"Howdy, Chantry," he greeted, and his voice was as heavy and bitter as his face. "I heard you were out. That board would parole Satan from hell, if he fed them a sob story."

Chantry saw how it was going to be, and suddenly he felt the weight of his ten years in the Laramie penitentiary. He felt tired and panicked by the star on Asper's holstein calfskin vest.

It didn't occur to him to wonder that John Asper should still wear the badge of a United States marshal, after all those years. Badge or no badge, John Asper would always symbolize the Law to Chantry. And the Law would forever loom as an oppressive shadow of tyranny and fear.

"I had a wire sayin' you passed through Lonetree with a counterfeiter we've been

It was a familiar sight to Chantry



after a long time," the lawman was saying, impaling Chantry on his steady, gleaming gaze. "I'll have a look at the inside of your carpetbag."

The bag contained nothing but a change of shirt and sox, and a few odds and ends for shaving and keeping up his clothes. That—together with the cheap twill suit and ten-dollar bill the warden had given him at the prison gate to help him pick up the ends of his broken life—represented the sum and total of his earthly belongings. But Asper dumped them carelessly into the dust and let them lie.

"So you're carrying none of it with you," the lawman said, making no effort to conceal his disappointment. "But I guess you're in trouble enough, without that. I'm the law here, Chantry. You're out of bounds—on this road."

The crowd set up a dull roar at something the man in the claw-hammer coat had said. Chantry didn't hear it, but he heard the lawman's veiled threat, and the big man's voice was no louder than a hissing whisper.

"Ten years is a long time to hold a grudge like yours, John," he mumbled, rebelling against the big man's baseless and relentless malevolence. "Snip Guiterman was nothing to you—"

"Snip was the best friend I had in the

world. And you shot him down, without giving him a chance."

"He threatened to kill me," Chantry reminded wearily. "And he was coming at me—"

"With his hands empty. And you shot him down!"



CHANTRY nodded. He'd killed Snip Guiterman, a known killer, over a card table. And Guiterman hadn't been armed. Chantry hadn't known that, until Big John Asper established the fact immediately after the shooting. But it wouldn't have made much difference. Knowing it, Chantry would have done the same.

That was why he'd never been able to justify the thing he'd done, even to himself. That was why he'd gone up—for life.

It all came back now, stark and clear as winter sunlight, through the shaded gray corridors of memory. He glanced up quickly, almost timidly—tempted for the first time to try to explain that shooting to the implacable man before him. Then he heard the poison word *coward* on John Asper's lips, and he dropped his eyes without speaking.

It had always been that way. Whether or not his reason for shooting was an exonerating one, he'd always been held

from voicing it—by that one poison word. For there was no denying the charge. Chantry *had* shot in fear. Fear not for himself—but for his hands! Fear that they would be bruised or broken in a fight, leaving him helpless and useless in a world that gave his kind no quarter.

Involuntarily, Chantry raised his hands and looked at them with confused pride and shame. They were slender and sensitive and delicate of line, like a gunman's hands, or a piano player's. Women's hands, John Asper had called them. But Asper had been wrong. They were gambler's hands. The swiftest and cleverest along the Union Pacific, before alcohol and ten years in a damp cell had robbed them of their genius.

Asper appeared to be reading his thoughts. "Still proud of your women's hands, eh, Chantry? I heard how you wouldn't do nothing but braid horsehair ropes at Laramie, for fear you'd spoil 'em for dealin' crooked cards. Well, you might as well have swung a rock hammer with the rest of 'em. I don't know how I'm going to do it, Chantry, but before I'm through with you—you're going to be back at Laramie, braiding horsehair ropes for the rest of your life!"

There was a triumphant rise in the big man's voice, and for the first time, Chantry hated him—because for the first time also he envied and feared the man. But Chantry's feelings were concealed behind the mask he had learned to wear at Laramie. A mask which betrayed nothing, to the law. Neither defiance nor slavishness.

"Look, John. I only came up here to see my kid. I heard he was followin' the road, like I did. I'd like to get him out of this hog ranch of a town, if I could. After that, well, if seein' me pesters you, I'll keep out of your way."

Chantry looked deep into his enemy's eyes as he spoke, and saw them go as hard and cold as jades.

"You can't keep out o' my way, Chantry! I've owed you a killing for twenty years. My badge kept me from paying off before. I sent you to the pen, as a second best. But now you're out. Chantry, either I'll find a way to send you back, or I'll crowd you into a fight and kill you—and take my chances with the badge!"

I've owed you a killing for twenty years!

So it wasn't because of Snip Guiterman that Asper hated him. It was because of Martha. And Chantry knew then he should have seen it from the first.

It didn't matter to Asper that Martha had made her own free choice between them, twenty years ago—or that she had lived to regret her choice. Asper hated Chantry because Chantry had taken the woman he loved. Because he had mistreated her—according to Asper's lights. He hated the kid, because the kid might have been his own son. Instead, the kid was Chantry's. A gambler, like his father. And Asper hated all gamblers—because of one.

Chantry's own hate drained out of him with the realization. "I'm beginning to see it, John," he said thinly. "You'll crowd me into a fight. If you kill me, your badge will save you. If I kill you, it'll be a violation of my parole. I'll go back to Laramie—for life. Heads you win. Tails I lose. You don't give a man an awful big chance, do you?"

The lawman's cold eyes glittered. "You're getting more chance than you gave Snip—or Martha. More chance than you deserve. And don't worry about your tinhorn calf leaving this town. I'll tend to that, after I've settled with you. I'll run him clean out of the territory, or send him out in a wooden overcoat."

The badge on the lawman's coat caught the rays of the sinking sun and winked derisively at Chantry as Asper turned on his heel and shouldered his way back into the crowd. Chantry stood alone, among his scattered belongings, staring at the broad departing back out of eyes that had turned as hard and black and desolate as stone.

CHAPTER TWO

A Stranger—and Afraid

THE big-top tent, when Chantry entered it later, was full of familiar sights and sounds and smells. The canopied main entrance opened onto a massive bar, which ran the length of the spacious interior. All of the tent behind the bar was curtained off with heavy canvas drops, and the rest of the enclosure was given to drinking tables and games of

chance, with a small portable floor for dancing.

Chantry's eyes, looking for his kid, were unconsciously seeking the face of a tousled boy of nine, such as he'd seen the kid during his last visit with Martha, at her parents' home in Indiana.

Martha had been betrothed to big, stolid John Asper when Chantry first met her, in the small town where her parents ran the grocery store. Chantry had been handsome in a way that was difficult to remember, now, and Martha's head had been turned by his attentions. Turned so that in the face of her parents' somber warning against marrying a gambler, Martha had handed Big John Asper back his gold engagement ring—and had given herself to Chantry.

Chantry never doubted she had loved him. But it was a bad bargain—for Martha, though she had been game. She had stood by her husband and her decision, and no word of complaint had ever passed her lips. She had followed Chantry, blindly and unquestioningly, wherever the lure of big winnings led. Riding the Hell-on-Wheels west as the Union Pacific built up the Platte and over the mountains to the Green and the Valley of the Bear. Over the Central Pacific to Helldorado and the Barbary Coast. Back to Virginia City and Gold Hill. North again to follow the Northern Pacific across Dakota and Montana.

Rich one day, hungry the next. Martha fading. No longer the yellow-haired, full-lipped girl Chantry had met in Indiana. But loving him, and his cheerful partner through it all, even after the baby came. Sharing his joy in the good. Bracing him up in the bad.

All those years, and Chantry had never guessed that she was fighting the shame and despair she found in life as an out-cast gambler's wife. Never, that is, until Chantry had started tutoring the kid in the art of handling the cards. That act of Chantry's had brought Martha's smothered feelings to the surface. Martha wouldn't see her son a gambler.

Surprised and stung and unable to understand—because he had not wanted to understand—Chantry had persisted in his determination to model the kid's life after his own. And Martha had ended by leav-

ing him, taking the kid along with her.

For weeks, Chantry had waited, expecting her to return. When she didn't, he'd gone to her parents' home, to get her. He had begged and threatened. But Martha had stood firm. She would go through it herself, willingly, for Chantry. But she would not raise a son to the same life. Her aging parents, triumphing at last, had ordered Chantry from their place.

Too proud or too weak to yield and change his profession, Chantry had gone back to the old life . . . alone. But it had not been the same. There had been more of the bad than the good. And Chantry—the wise gambler who never drank—took to hitting the bottle.

Drink was all that was needed to complete what already had been begun, and Chantry sank successively from gentleman gambler to a percentage house man, to a small-time tinhorn who played the small games in honkatons and trouble joints. Caught in a crooked deal by another crooked gambler, he had lost his nerve and shot his way out—to save his hands for more crooked deals. His enemy, John Asper, pushed the case, and Chantry had gone to jail.

John Asper had dogged Chantry's footsteps like an avenging angel, from Indiana to Bearcat. Never since the day that Martha had handed Big John his ring had Chantry been free of the big man's oppressive shadow. And now Chantry knew why. John Asper had married, soon after Martha and Chantry were wed in Abilene. But Asper had never ceased loving the blue-eyed girl they both had known as Martha Tarbell. . . .

It was early under the big top, but a lot of liquor was crossing the bar, and a number of games were going. Chantry ignored the roulette and faro and dice tables. The kid would be handling a card-deck, wherever he was. And eagerly yet reluctantly and half afraid of what they'd see, Chantry's eyes searched for the face of his son.

Chantry's dismay when he didn't see the kid was tintured with relief. Then his eyes stopped on a face two tables down the row, and he grew very quiet inside. He couldn't be sure at first, the features looked so sallow and hard and drawn, in the harsh light from the carbide lamp. But Martha's

eyes looked out of the boldly handsome face, and Martha's light wavy brown hair covered the head. It was the kid, all right.

Chantry's kid, gotten out in black frock coat, boiled white shirt, and black string tie. Chantry's kid, looking—for all but his eyes and hair—exactly as Chantry had looked, twenty years before.

The kid raised his head under the intensity of Chantry's stare, and their eyes caught and held, spanning the space between them. Chantry in that moment forgot to breathe. Then someone at the table called for cards. The kid's eyes dropped to the table again, without flickering in recognition. And Chantry breathed again.

The kid hadn't recognized him! Well, the kid had only been nine—and ten years is a long time. It had been, to Chantry.

The kid was playing, and Chantry knew it was the wrong time to attempt to appraise him, from his set, expressionless face. He looked instead at the kid's hands, and the faintest lingering doubt as to the youngster's identity evaporated from his mind. The hands were long and supple and delicate of line. And they handled the cards with a deft and swift confidence that awoke a burning pride inside Chantry.

Chantry moved closer to watch the play. The kid had lost interest in him, and didn't look up. Chantry saw he was winning, and the same reluctant pride swelled high in his chest once more. The kid was good. As good as Chantry, maybe, when Chantry was in his youth. And there hadn't been a man his equal along the road.

The kid won two hands straight as Chantry watched. A bull-necked grader flushed red in anger, and stared at the kid with hostile, red-rimmed eyes. Betting was heavier on the third hand, and the kid was dealing. The kid and the grader forced the others out. The grader showed a high straight. The kid put down three jacks and two kings. The grader came to his feet with a snarl, and started for the kid. His face was twisted with fury, his huge arms gangling.



THE scene and the build-up were familiar to Chantry. He watched the kid narrowly, for some betrayal of fear or defiance. But the kid showed

no emotion whatever. He merely signaled a watchful bouncer, and the hulking house man stepped close and felled the grader with a blackjack. The bouncer dragged the trouble-maker toward the front door to throw him out. The kid passed the deal, and the game went on as though nothing had happened.

Chantry shrugged faintly and returned to the bar. He'd seen enough. He couldn't be certain about the deal, but the rest of it had followed a familiar pattern. The challenge, and the kid's cold indifference. The bouncer's intervention, taking it off the kid's hands. The casual resumption of the game.

The kid was making the house a lot of money. He was valuable property—now. He was protected, completely. But the day would come when he wouldn't be so valuable. On that day, the kid might have to choose between killing and losing his dealing hands. He might have to choose between going to jail for life and losing his skill and spending the rest of his life swamping out bars and honkatonks, for a meal ticket. It was a choice that the kid was bound to face.

Chantry looked down at his own hands, seeing again the skilled fingers of the gambling king of the U. P. Helltown. And out of the gray distance of the past he heard the warning voice of Faro John Beal, his tutor in his gambling youth.

"You got possibilities, kid. But watch them hands like they was gold, an' leave the brawls to me. A good dealer can't do nothing but deal, with his hands. An' ever you let anything happen to them fingers o' yourn, you'll be emptyin' gobboons an' sleepin' in the back room with the mops. Don't you forget it!"

Chantry hadn't forgotten. He had remembered, the time Snip Guiterman came at him. He hadn't had a bodyguard, then. He'd shot Snip, to save his hands—and had gone to jail.

The kid would face the same thing—some day.

The front door opened, and a freckle-faced boy of eleven came in to give the kid a message. The kid tossed him a quarter, discarded his hand, and followed him to the door.

He passed close enough that Chantry could have put out a hand and stopped

him. But the kid's nearness filled Chantry with the same undirected panic as he'd felt when first confronted by Big John Asper, and he shrank back against the bar to let the kid pass.

Anyhow, seeing the kid had confirmed a fear which had been growing on him, ever since his first meeting with Asper. He, a stranger to his own son, could never persuade the kid to leave gambling, and the terminal town. The kid was born to the road, as Chantry had been. He would kill for it, as Chantry had, if it ever came to it—and he'd pay the price of killing. But he'd never leave it alone.

Chantry was wasting his time, staying. He would take the next train out of Bearcat, and forget the kid. The kid could take care of himself. And maybe Chantry could get far enough away that he'd never see John Asper again.

Then the door opened in the kid's hand, and framed a vision of loveliness that left Chantry all vapor inside. It was only a girl in a yellow silk dress with ruffles and a wide hoop skirt and a peek-a-boo bonnet to match. But Chantry had not seen such radiant, blooming beauty since first he'd

seen Martha Tarbell, back in her Indiana home. And the memory of Martha just then was about as much as a man could stand.

The girl's face brightened even more at sight of the kid, and her blue eyes caressed him shyly. Then she said something to him, through her smile. The kid signaled another man to take his place at the table, and stepped outside. The slamming door cut him from view.

Like a man in a trance, Chantry crossed to the door and followed them out. He watched the kid, guiding the girl down the crowded street, carrying her tiny silk umbrella. Chantry could see from the way she clung to his arm and the way they smiled into each other's eyes that it was no casual acquaintance between the two. And, suddenly, Chantry's blue eyes went black and hard.

The thing was following a pattern a bit too closely. The kid might have gambling in his blood, through no fault of his own. His life might be his own to live, and Chantry might be powerless to turn it from its natural channel. But Chantry couldn't stand by and see the kid ruin the life of

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the blue-eyed girl, along with his own—as Chantry had ruined the life of another blue-eyed girl.

So Chantry couldn't dodge it, after all. He couldn't escape his obligation to the son he had brought into the world, and schooled to follow in his own footsteps. His obligation to the bright-eyed girl who was innocently entangled in an invisible web of tragedy and despair, was of Chantry's own spinning.

Chantry couldn't dodge it. He had to devise a way in which he could force the kid to quit the road, and gambling too, forever. If he could do that, then the kid and girl would still be able to find a happiness in life that Chantry had missed and now would never know.

The kid's slender, soft hands looked strangely white in the fading light of day, as he gesticulated in his talk. Chantry's hard eyes focused on those hands—hands which had condemned the kid to the life of a gambler. Hands which had betrayed him into tragedy, the depths of which the kid's arrogant, cock-sure mind could not yet fathom.

And Chantry in an illuminating flash could see in stark, cold clarity the one way in which he could gain his end—and shield the kid and his girl from the fate which lay ahead of them. The fate which had already overtaken Chantry, and Martha.

His mind was busy with the plan when sunlight glinting on polished steel attracted his attention to the far side of the crowded street. He saw Big John Asper standing in the open door of a blacksmith shop, staring after the kid, his face a mask of violent, loathing hate.

Knowing the secret of John Asper's inexorable, relentless malevolence, Chantry had ceased to wonder at it. So the lawman's expression as he watched the kid only served to remind Chantry that if his plan were to be successful, he'd have to carry it out soon.

CHAPTER THREE

The Black Bag

IT WAS nine o'clock before the kid showed up at the big-top that night. Nine o'clock. The hour when the small-fry and the pokers were eliminated,

and the big games began. The kid was big-time. The house brought him in at the kill. And Chantry still found a perverted warming pride in the thought.

The kid did not bring his girl under the big-top when he came back. There were plenty of others there, both house girls and girls who were customers, but the kid's girl was as different from these as light was different from dark.

But wait until the girl had been the kid's wife a time. Men had a way of bringing their women to their own level, whether they meant to have it that way or not. Martha too had been on a higher plane, at first. Chantry had only been too blind to see it.

It was too late for Chantry and Martha, now. But it wasn't too late for the kid and his girl. Still, no one could tell the kid. It would have to be done another way.

Chantry waited, fingering the worn ten-dollar bill in his pocket, until the kid had resumed his place at the table. Then he crossed over and took a chair opposite him. The time had come, and once more Chantry found it hard to breathe. But the ability to hold everything back and let nothing out stays with a man, and Chantry was outwardly calm as he tossed the wrinkled ten over and asked for chips.

He half expected it to be returned, and he wasn't disappointed. A shadow of annoyance and scorn passed over the kid's face. Then he glanced up, not at Chantry's face, but at his cheap dusty clothes. And he tossed the bill back.

"Sorry, old timer. Five-hundred-dollar minimum, tonight. Come back in the morning. It's cheaper."

Old timer! The kid mouthed the term with all the complaisance of youth, which cannot comprehend of old age as an inevitable and personal tragedy, as much a part of life as youth and death. One of these days the kid would wake up with a start and realize he himself was old—that the best part of his own years were behind him, and he was looking back at life instead of ahead.

Chantry wadded the bill into his palm and left the table without looking at the kid again. He stopped at a roulette table and chose a number which would have paid off if his luck had been right. He

lost the ten on the one throw, and returned to the bar, empty-handed. Even with the board. Well, it wouldn't be the first time he'd started from scratch. But never before had the stakes been so high.

At the bar he found John Asper waiting for him, watching him.

"So the big bear isn't big enough to sit down and play crooked aces with the little bear," the lawman drawled. "You still think he's worth putting yourself out for?"

Chantry met the scorning eyes squarely. "That's the point, John. Loan me five hundred dollars for an hour, and I'll show you."

Asper looked at him, doubtfully. "I don't get it, Chantry. Anyhow, I wouldn't loan you the sweat off my feet, if you were choking. I thought you knew that."

Chantry nodded. He'd known it, all right. But a drowning man grasps at straws. And there was still one more straw within reach.

"The hell with you, Asper," he said tonelessly. Then he left the lawman staring after him and walked out the door into the dark.

The Brown Palace was a hip-roofed clapboard shell erected in Bearcat prior to the coming of the rails. The drunken night clerk jerked a thumb at a "No Rooms" sign in the dirty window when Chantry entered. But Chantry spoke a name, and the night clerk lurched to his feet, picked up a lamp, and guided him down a narrow hall to the last door in the dark corridor.

The door opened a crack to the clerk's knock. The fat man who posed as a drummer looked out, cautiously. Seeing Chantry, he grunted and swung the door open to admit him. He made certain there was no one else in the hall, then he closed the door and bolted it behind him.

Chantry saw him slide a derringer carefully back into his pocket.

"You have come back," the fat man stated, matter-of-factly, when the sound of the clerk's uncertain feet had faded down the hall. "Why?"

The fat man had tilted the low-hanging carbide lamp so that the brass reflector threw the full glare into Chantry's eyes, blinding him. Chantry raised a hand to shield his eyes, but the fat man caught at his wrist and pulled it down. The hand which Chantry had thought would be flab-

by and soft as the man's face was hard and thorny, like a claw.

"Why?" the fat man repeated.

"I can pass a thousand dollars of your money, in this town."

A silence followed Chantry's declaration. Silence broken only by the spluttering hiss of the lamp. Then the fat man spoke again. "You refused, once, to try. What has changed your mind?"

Chantry shrugged. "There is a poker game, down at the big tent. The stakes are big. I'd like to get a drag out of the pot."

"You'd buy in with my money, and take good money out?"

"That was the deal, wasn't it?"

"*There wasn't any deal!*" The small, dry claw tightened on Chantry's wrist, and he felt the muzzle of the derringer thrust hard against his ribs. "There isn't any deal, now. Nothing but a shot in the heart, for you! You think I didn't see you talking with the law, after you left me on the train? You think I didn't see the law looking for me, after? You think I don't know you've sold me out, for the reward on my head?"



CHANTRY felt the derringer dig deeper into his side, and he knew the fat man would shoot him in another second. He lurched suddenly sideways, bringing one hand up, overhand, and knocked the swinging carbide lamp into the fat man's face. Glass tinkled lightly, and the room was plunged into darkness.

Almost simultaneously, the derringer exploded. Chantry had pinioned the small gun between his arm and body in turning, so that his clothing muffled the report. But he felt the scalding burn of the exploding powder through his coat and shirt—and the hot stabbing pain of the soft-nosed slug as it ploughed its deep furrow along his ribs.

Chantry grabbed for the gun before the fat man could squeeze off another shot. He got both hands on the stubby barrel, and pushed the muzzle away from him. But there was a sodden, stubborn strength in the grunting fat body, and the man who posed as a drummer fought him savagely for possession of the pistol.

Suddenly, in a burst of desperate, frantic strength, the fat man bore him backward in the darkness. Chantry's feet tripped on something, and he went down on his back. Both his hands were still on the gun. He fell heavily, pulling the fat man down on top of him.

The fat man was thrown off guard by the sudden fall, and his grip on the gun slackened. Chantry bent the muzzle farther away from him. Then the full weight of the fat man's falling body struck him, and the gun discharged a second time.

The derringer was wedged between their two bodies, and again the report was muffled. Once more, too, Chantry felt the smattering burn of the explosion through his clothes. But this time, he felt something else as well. Something more ominous and terrifying than the proximity of death, a second before. A curious tension ran through the flabby body on top of him in the dark. Then the tension passed, and the fat man fell away from him.

Chantry rolled swiftly to his feet. For a long time he crouched in the chambered darkness, listening to the utter silence. Then the desert moon came from behind a cloud, and its thin light filtered through the dirty window, bathing the fat man in a pool of yellow light.

The man still lay upon the floor, his mouth open against the rough pine boards. A dark stain spread over the floor around him. A stain that glistened black in the moonlight.

A minute or an hour passed while Chantry crouched, staring in revulsion at the man he had killed. Then, caught up by the impulse, he relighted the lamp, which would still burn. Stepping wide of the huddled form on the floor, he searched the room for the little black bag. A murderer, robbing the dead.

He found the bag, under the rickety poster bed. It was full of fresh, crisp one-hundred dollar bills. Chantry counted out fifty thousand dollars in the worthless money and pushed the big roll into his pocket. Then he searched the dead man's spare wardrobe until he found a coat that would replace his own torn garment and hide the ugly rent in his shirt and skin, where the derringer bullet had gone. Still not looking at the man he had killed and robbed, he unlocked the door and left the

hotel by way of the unlocked back door.

There in the moon shadows cast by the skeletal Brown Palace hotel, Chantry had his moment of reflection and resolve.

He thought of how easy it would be to just keep going. For the way out was still open. The first train into Bearcat would be turned around before morning and heading back to Lonetree and Cheyenne. He had money—counterfeit money, but good as any if he were careful—enough to carry him far out of John Asper's reach. Out of reach of his parole board, in Laramie, and give him peace and security and some semblance of comfort for the first time in his life.

His other alternative was equally clear. He could return to the big tent, buy into the poker game with the worthless money, and go ahead with his scheme. If he did that, the money would be discovered during the game or later, and eventually matched with that he'd left in the dead man's black bag. That would identify him as the murderer, beyond doubt. And murder was still murder, even when the man killed was a criminal.

If Chantry stayed in Bearcat, he would be playing straight into John Asper's hands—handing the lawman, on a platter, all he needed to fulfill his vengeance and send Chantry back to Laramie, for life. But if he left, he would be running out on the kid. The kid he had brought into the world, and trained in his most formative years for the thing the kid was now doing.

There was only one choice, really. And Chantry accepted it—completely.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Gambler's Guts

THE kid looked surprised when Chantry returned and bought into the game with ten thousand dollars. But he didn't question the money. Chantry had wrinkled the new greenbacks and soiled them properly before entering the big tent. But he breathed easier after the kid had placed them out of sight in the oak bank box on the table before him.

The game was crooked. Chantry had suspected it before he sat down. When his deal came around, he was certain of it. His fingers, stiff and uncertain as they

were on the deck, counted the cards as they shuffled, finding only fifty. Two cards were missing. And Chantry was certain the missing cards were in the kid's sleeve.

He didn't hold it against the kid. It was all in the game. The kid was hired by the house and taking orders. He had to win, and was taking the easiest and shortest cut. He didn't know that the long, hard way around was often the shortest path between two points.

Chantry bided his time, played it slow and careful. Close to the board. Betting when he held the cards, dropping out when he didn't. All the time his confidence was returning, and he was appraising the others in the game. For when stakes got high, Chantry played men, not cards.

There was a drunken grader at his left, a one-eyed promoter at his right. The kid sat between an aging rancher with a wind-burned face, and a tight-lipped man who might be a contractor, by his clothes. Six men playing, with two men's lives in pawn. And only Chantry knew the stakes.

He concluded, by process of elimination, that the contractor was the man with the roll—the man the kid was laying for. So he forgot the others, and played the contractor and the kid.

A few hands convinced him the contractor was playing honest cards. But he felt no compunction. It was a house game, and any man who knew cards understood he was taking his chances in a game like that, and was prepared to combat it. The ones who didn't know cards had no business playing. Not under the big-top tent.

With the players pigeonholed, Chantry watched the cards again, seeing that three aces came out. Always the same three. The other was in the kid's sleeve.

When his own deal came around again, Chantry dealt himself seven cards, for five. Two of the seven went into his sleeve, and both were aces. The deal went around to the kid again. Chantry watched him count the cards in the shuffle—as Chantry himself had taught him to. He saw the kid's puzzled frown, saw him reshuffle, carefully, taking another count to make sure. Saw him hesitate before dealing and look slowly about the table, expecting the crooked gambler's eyes to give him away.

Chantry looked at the ashes on the tip of his hand-rolled cigarette.

The kid hesitated so long before dealing the cards that Chantry was afraid the others would notice and get suspicious. The kid was trapped, and didn't know what to do. He knew there was a man as clever and as crooked as himself in the game. He understood the threat that fact constituted to himself. But he couldn't announce the missing cards and demand a search, because there were cards in his own sleeve. And as house man and the accuser, he would have to submit to first search, himself.

Had the tables been reversed, Chantry would have gotten the holdout cards into the deck, and demanded a showdown. But the kid was young and lacked experience.

The kid had hesitated so long that every eye around the table was watching him, questioningly, wondering why he didn't deal. And even such incredibly fast fingers as the kid's could not pull two cards from his sleeve, undetected, with every player watching him.

The kid recognized the situation and dealt, draw poker. Five cards out, face down. Chantry picked up his hand and fanned it out. But he didn't bother to look at it. The hand didn't count. He was watching the contractor, who sat next to the kid.

The contractor opened for five hundred dollars, and Chantry knew this was the kill. The kid was scared. Scared of the man with the two aces in his sleeves. The man he hadn't been able to detect. He was after the contractor's roll now, before the man with the holdout cards had a chance to play them. He had dealt a cold hand, to shake the contractor down. Then he'd close out the game.

This was it. The payoff. The knowledge sent a deep, familiar thrill along Chantry's veins. He'd win or go down on on this hand. And the stakes were greater than even the kid could know.

The drunken grader took another look, and tossed his cards to the center. Chantry folded his hand, and stayed, without looking. The one-eyed promoter and the rancher both dropped out. The kid had dealt them nothing. He was taking no chances on the man with the cards in his sleeve. He had dealt hands only to himself and the contractor, and his own hand was best. Chantry didn't need to look to know that

he held nothing. The stakes were high, and Chantry wasn't playing the cards.

The kid met the contractor's open, and raised a thousand dollars. The contractor studied his hand, and stayed. Chantry counted his blues, and pushed them all to the center, raising two thousand. Then he looked up, stonily, into the kid's eyes. The kid knew then who held the holdout aces!

Both the kid and the contractor stayed. The contractor called for two cards, meaning he was trying for a full house, and the kid's hands were unsteady on the deck. Chantry stood pat, and saw surprise and puzzlement break through the kid's non committal mask. The kid took one card, and Chantry played him for four of a kind. Maybe a royal flush, with the cards in his sleeve.

Chantry watched the kid narrowly until he'd discarded, to make certain he put down no more cards than he'd picked up. Then he looked indifferently away. It didn't matter now, if the kid exchanged the cards in his sleeve for two in his hand. Chantry was still playing the man.

The contractor, engrossed in his cards and unaware of the real and greater drama of the game, bet five thousand dollars, indicating he had filled his house. Chantry doubted that he had the chips to cover, but he didn't bother to count. He had the kid puzzled and rattled, and bewildered, and success in the thing he had to do depended on his ability to keep him bewildered and disordered until he could break him. Break him, utterly, so that the kid would forget himself in sheer desperation and panic, and revert in his helplessness to man's oldest impulse—to strike out and destroy the thing which threatens him.

That was what Chantry wanted of his son, and he was thinking of the next bet not in terms of five thousand, but of forty thousand. He reached into his pocket and his fingers closed on the thick roll of greenbacks—on the roll of counterfeit money for which he had killed and robbed that night, so that he would be able to make this very bet.

But this time it was Chantry who hesitated, uncertain and disordered and panicked. For at that instant the smoke-blue atmosphere under the big tent had thickened and grown dark and threatening. A moment dragged while Chantry sat stiffly

upright and alert in every fiber of his mind, trying to sense from what direction impending disaster would strike.

Then, suddenly, he knew. The feeling he recognized as the same oppressive suffocation he had felt when Big John Asper's shadow had fallen across his path, down by the train.



HE TURNED slowly and saw Asper standing less than five feet from his chair, watching him. Two men were with him, two men wearing badges. All their eyes were on Chantry, and those eyes were hard and bright and alert.

But it wasn't the lawmen's attitude or their eyes that stretched Chantry's guts as tight as fiddlestrings. It was the small, dark object John Asper held in one hand.

John Asper was carrying the little black bag.

There comes a time in every man's life when he stands at a crossroads, with two courses open before him, stretching away to the horizon. Beyond the skyline he cannot see. He makes his choice in the knowledge that once the horizon is reached and he can see beyond, it is too late to back-track and take the other trail. Time and opportunity lost are not regained, and a man must make his selection on the basis of the trail's appearance, and the height of the horizon to which it leads.

Chantry, in the eternity which dragged while he sat at the table under Asper's watchful eyes, was at a crossroads, looking up the two courses open to him. For two there were, yet. The worthless money for which he had killed a man was still in his pocket, out of sight. And Big John Asper, whatever else he might know, could not be certain it was there.

Chantry could throw in his hand and leave the game. He could leave the big tent—run for it, if he had to, and get rid of the damning greenbacks before he could be overtaken. Asper would find the other bills in the game, likely, but there would be nothing to prove they had come from Chantry. And the testimony of the drunken hotel clerk would never be admitted into court.

Chantry could do that, and leave the kid and the blue-eyed girl to their lot, as he

and Martha had been left to theirs, twenty years ago. That was the easy course. Or he could pull the forty thousand from his pocket, and play out the game he had started.

Then a door opened in Chantry's mind, and he saw the blue-eyed girl standing again outside the big top door, looking up at the kid out of eyes that worshiped and entreated and teased. He knew he must be getting old, because his memory kept getting the blue-eyed girl all mixed up with Martha. And he couldn't think of Martha anymore without an inner trembling and remorse that was stronger than fear or even the desire to go on living.

"I'll call five thousand," he heard his voice saying, "and raise it thirty-five thousand."

The other players grunted in surprise at the size of the raise, for Chantry didn't strike them as a man who'd have thirty-five *dollars* in his pocket. But no one challenged him when he drew the roll of worthless bills from his pocket and tossed them onto the table. Not even John Asper. But the lawman's green eyes gleamed, and Chantry knew he had recognized the bills.

Chantry's heart slipped into the pit of his stomach, for he knew he'd lost the bet. But Asper, strangely, did not move to interfere. It was as if Asper understood the nature of the game and the stakes, and was waiting to see its issue.

Chantry knew this could not be possible. But the lawman still did not offer to interfere, and Chantry turned his attention back to the game.

The contractor grunted and threw his hand to the center, and all the players but Chantry sat staring at the big roll of new-old bills. Chantry looked at the kid.

The kid was bewildered and shaken. He had dealt a cold hand, expecting to break the contractor and end the game. But something had gone wrong. He knew he had the contractor beat, but he had counted

Chantry out of it from the beginning, and hadn't paid attention to the cards he'd given him. He knew Chantry had two aces in his sleeve, and he knew he'd met a man colder and more clever than himself. He knew Chantry wouldn't be betting unless he were certain of winning.

The kid, it was plain, wanted to quit. But there was fifty thousand dollars in the jackpot, and that was a fabulous sum, even under the big top. The kid had to win.

The kid moistened his lips with his tongue, and his sensitive hands trembled as he reached into his oak box for chips to cover the bet. And it seemed to Chantry that there wasn't a sound in all the tent as the kid spread his hand for them all to see.

It was a royal flush, as Chantry had guessed it would be. And Chantry hadn't even bothered to take the aces out of his sleeve. He still didn't look at his own cards, and he scarcely looked at the kid's. He was still playing the man.

"You can throw the ace an' joker out," he said softly. "I was bettin' against the other three cards—an' the two in your sleeve!"

Silence fell, stark and complete, as if the world had suddenly ceased to turn. "I was playing against the cards in your sleeve?" he repeated, in a voice that carried to the farthest corners of the tent.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fight in Helltown

THE kid's face was ashen. He had forgotten even to signal the ever-ready bouncer to come to his rescue. But no such signal was needed. The bounce had sized things up for himself, and was bearing down on Chantry, silently, his blackjack swinging wickedly.

Chantry's calculations had made pro-

Dee Linford, creator of the unforgettable Chantrys in this powerful novel, has written another human epic of the frontier for the current STAR WESTERN. It's called "When Sheepmen Get Their Guns," and it packs a .45 caliber wallop for all who demand the best in Western fiction! Read it—enjoy it—today!

vision for this eventuality. He waited, appearing to watch the kid, until the house bully was almost within reach of him. Then he spun quickly to his feet, grabbed up his chair, and swung it overhead like a pick. The bouncer was taken by surprise, and one of the chair's heavy legs parted his oiled-down hair neatly, a second before the chair disintegrated in Chantry's hands. The bully's knees gave way, as if under a too-heavy weight and he measured his length on the floor.

The crowd came to life, fired by the excitement of a fight, and surged toward the table. Two bouncers from the far side of the tent moved in, and Chantry saw he'd lost the hand, after all. The house meant to give him no chance to prove his charges.

Then, for the second time that evening, John Asper behaved strangely. Deputies at his side, the lawman stepped between Chantry and the house men, and held up a restraining hand.

"Keep back," he told the bouncers and the crowd. "Stand back, and let them finish the game. There's something up here, and I mean to find out what."

Chantry was wondering if he'd heard right when the lawman whirled to face him. "Go on with your game," the marshal growled. "*Our* business can wait."

Then Chantry knew. Asper *had* recognized the money, and Chantry was the same as back in Laramie. But Asper hated the kid as savagely as he hated Chantry. He didn't know what Chantry was about, but Chantry was exposing the kid as a crooked gambler, and Asper meant that he should continue. Jail would wait upon a counterfeiter and murderer—while Chantry shamed his son before the world!

Once more the temptation was strong to back down. To leave the kid the one thing he had left in the world—his reputation as a gambler. The temptation was strong to pull the gun in his pocket, kill John Asper and be killed himself, and divert attention from the white, staring kid who was his son. That way, he wouldn't have to go back to Laramie, and the crowd would write him off as a lunatic, and would forget the charges he'd made against the kid.

Then Chantry thought again of Martha, and the blue-eyed girl who was Martha

all over again, and his resolve returned.

"I bet against *three* of the cards in your hand," he said, "and the two in your sleeve. Show the two, and we'll see who takes the pot."

The kid looked about him like a trapped animal. But the house men were holding back, bluffed out by the law. All the kid could see was the crowd, and Chantry.

The kid's moment had come, prematurely, as it had come to Chantry. The kid was in trouble, and the protection he had come to regard as a part of his equipment was suddenly withdrawn. He was trapped and deserted and alone, and faced with the thing he feared most in the world—loss of his gambler's hands.

Chantry knew from memory what the kid was suffering, and the impulse returned to discard his disguise and comfort his stricken son, and face the mob with him. But a feeling and a love stronger than sympathy for a scared, cowering kid carried him on.

"I'm having a look at the cards in your sleeve!"

Chantry moved in, and the kid's eyes darted wildly, seeking some avenue of escape. But the hostile crowd hemmed him in. The kid's hand went into his pocket and came out with a gun. But Chantry was already within reach, and—angered and shamed by the gun and the fear in the wide eyes—he hit him hard in the face.

It was the first time in his life that Chantry had ever struck another man in anger. He didn't know how to hit and not be hurt himself, and he felt the jolt and the driving pain high up in his shoulder. But the kid still held the gun, and Chantry took no chances. Following in, he tore the gun from the kid's hand, and struck him again, a stunning blow in the mouth.

Chantry knew that he shouldn't have lashed out a second time with his hurting hand. But Chantry was going back to Laramie, for life, and for the first time in twenty-five years he needed to consider his hands no longer. Exulting in the knowledge, he found the pain in his right hand satisfying, almost gratifying—as when a rank sore is purified with red-hot steel. He struck out harder than ever, another time, driving his injured hand like a battering ram, squarely between the kid's



He sprang back from the table. . . .

eyes. The kid reeled backward, smashed a card table and crashed to the floor.

Chantry, cold and clear-headed now, was afraid he'd hit too hard. Afraid he'd ended the fight, without accomplishing what he'd set out to accomplish. But the kid sat up and looked about him blankly. He was bleeding from his mouth and nose, and the fear was gone from his eyes. Fear which Chantry knew had been for his hands, not himself. And when expression invaded the blank eyes again, Chantry knew he had triumphed. For the expression was one of outraged anger.

Chantry had won because he'd goaded the kid at last into anger of a kind a gambler cannot afford give himself over to. The kid had forgotten his fear and his hands. He was raging mad.

The kid got to his feet slowly, and found his stance. Then he snarled and came in, swinging. Chantry made no effort to avoid the soft white fists, maladroitness as they were in their first fight. One of those fists found his chin at the apex of a long uppercut that started down below the kid's knees. The blow carried surprising weight

and strength. Chantry was slammed backward into a heavy pine upright.

Chantry expected, and would have liked, a breather. But the kid gave him none. Following in like one possessed, the kid drove a left and a right and another left in quick succession to Chantry's head. The pain in Chantry's right hand was so intense he could no longer use it. He jabbed at the kid, awkwardly, with his left, shoving him backward.

But the kid, like Chantry, had forgotten his hands, and seemed frenzied in his passion to strike out at something and beat it into submission. Surging in with a fury that spoke eloquently of his inner turmoil and abandon, the kid drove Chantry against the thick pole once more.

Chantry was bloody and dazed, and almost stifled with the pride that swelled high in his chest. This fighter—this bear-cat who needed nothing more than a chance to fight—was his kid. And Chantry had thought him a coward!

Chantry wanted to yell out in his exuberance—to tell the crowd and all the world that they were father and son. To

call on them all to bear witness if either of them shrank from fighting, when fighting was the only solution.

Then the kid's left fist found Chantry's chin again in a jab that tilted his head solidly against the pole behind him. Almost simultaneously, the kid's right came up in a looping, stunning drive that seemed to crush his skull like an egg shell, between fist and pole.

Chantry thought in that moment of confused, blinding pain, that the kid had hit him with a hammer or a heavy weight. Then his vision cleared, and he saw the kid coming at him again, his right hand hanging helplessly at his side. And then Chantry knew that the crushing of bone had been in the kid's fist, not in his own head.

Once more Chantry wanted to shout in exultation. But the kid was coming in, his left hand poised for a final, killing blow. Chantry saw it coming, and ran into it, deliberately, striking as a mad-dened buck sheep strikes, with the top of his hurting head.

Once more he felt and heard bone crack and break under the impact of the coming together. This time he knew it was not his head, and he knew he'd triumphed in the thing he'd hoped desperately to do. Then he was on the floor, writhing helplessly from the force of the blow against his skull.

And because he'd accomplished the ultimate, and because he wished to spare the kid the final shame of being beaten from his feet, he gave himself over to the soft, cushioning blackness that engulfed him.



IT WAS daylight when Chantry was next conscious of being alive, and he was in the little whitewashed cube which John Asper used as a portable headquarters. Big John Asper was there, too, and they were alone. There was a large pile of money—silver and bills—on the table where Chantry's head had been resting. The little black bag was there, too. Big John had collected all his evidence!

After a while, when he had braced himself to it, he raised his head and met the lawman's fathomless green eyes. He saw in the eyes what he had known all

along, and he looked away from Asper.

"Where's the kid?" he asked, voicing the first question to occur to him, and dread weighted his words.

"The kid's in good hands," the lawman said in a voice completely devoid of emotion. "Nellie's got him down at the tent, taking care of his hands. They both got broke in the fight."

Chantry nodded, remembering, and his spirits rose a little. Then he recalled the blue-eyed girl. "Nellie? The girl that called for him tonight at the big top?"

John Asper mumbled an affirmative. "I've warned her against taking up with a gambler. But now she says the kid will never gamble again, and I guess she's right—with his hands in the shape they are. There is going to be a service today. You like to see the kid married before you—uh, leave?"

Triumph soared high inside Chantry, with the news. So it had worked out, after all. He could go back to the hell at Laramie now, and it wouldn't be hell any more.

But still he kept confusing the blue-eyed girl with Martha, and still the thought of Martha choked him up inside, even though the other exuberance was still burning inside him. He tried to put the thought of her away from him, because he knew a man must not give in to vapors—not in front of his enemy, at any rate. But it was hard to carry off.

"Reckon I won't bother," he managed, huskily, and he met Asper's level green eyes for the first time. "Fact is, I'd like to start for Laramie, right away."

The lawman said nothing, merely looked at him out of his inscrutable green eyes.

A faint anger stirred inside Chantry. "No, I'm not going to crawl, Asper. I was on parole. I knew I'd never get by you, with murder and passing counterfeit money. I didn't aim to try."

"Then why did you do it? A man doesn't go back to a place like that because he likes it."

Chantry shrugged. "There's some things a man does and can't give a reason, John."

Asper's green eyes lighted. "Sometimes he doesn't have to. Sometimes it's plain enough, without. Like this job. You needed to get into the game so you could

crowd the kid into a fight and spoil his hands for gambling. You went back to that counterfeiter—after you'd refused to handle his stuff once—to get the money. He thought you were stooling for me, and tried to kill you. You killed him instead, then you passed up a chance to hit the grit, with all that bogus money. You went ahead with the thing you had in mind, and you knew all the time that you were giving me all the evidence I needed to send you back to Laramie, for a thousand years. You did that—for your kid."

Chantry blinked, in wonder. "How the hell do you know so much, John?"

Asper's expression didn't change. "I had that counterfeiter pegged from the first. He killed my deputy, in Oglalla, but not before I had a look at him. I didn't grab him at first, because I thought you were in with him, and I wanted to take you, too."

"My men followed him to the Brown Palace, and took the room through the wall from him. One of them was watching him through a knot hole, every minute. They heard everything that was said when you went there. They saw him draw the gun and try to kill you. One of them shadowed you when you left the place, with part of the money. The other came for me."

"You had me all muddled, when I found you, in the big tent. Then when you flashed the money right in front of me, knowing damned well that I'd recognize it—I held off arresting you, to find out just what you were up to. And now I'm glad I did. I—"

"Glad—?"

"Glad! I was still figuring then, on

trying to push the case against you. I've got a good record, Chantry. Never lost a case. I'd hate to have spoiled it, now."

"Spoiled it?"

John Asper grunted. "I wouldn't of had a prayer. You got a witness who heard the fat man say you'd refused once to handle his stuff. The same witness saw you kill him in self-defence. And as for what money you took from the bag, well, you got a lot o' witnesses to what you did with that. I had no case again' you, Chantry. And after what I saw, there in the big tent, I'm not trying to make one."

IT TOOK a long time for the lawman's meaning to sink into Chantry's whirling mind, and when it finally did, he sat silent, waiting for the joker to become evident. And suddenly Asper grinned—the first grin the lawman had ever given Chantry in his life.

"The crowd even compared your hand with the kid's, after the fight. They threw out his ace an' joker, and that busted his flush. They dug the cards out of his sleeve, and he still didn't have anything. You had two trays, and your hand was good. That last pot's yours, Chantry, and there is thirty thousand in good money, in it. The crowd gathered it up and sent it down with me, when we packed you out."

Chantry felt instinctively for the aces in his own sleeve. Aces he hadn't used. Asper saw him, and his smile spread.

"They didn't think to look in your sleeve, Chantry, or they might not of liked you so well. They wouldn't of understood, like I did. I found 'em, down here. And I threw 'em in the stove. Why, if I



said anything about it, that crowd would think I was still trying to frame you, and they'd tear me to pieces. I'm a smart John Law, Chantry. I know when I'm licked. You're free, to go where you want. And you've got a nice wad there. Another game or two like the last one, and you can open your own casino!"

Chantry shook his head, still dazed and incredulous. "I'm through with gambling, John. I'll find me a little homestead somewhere, and try a little farming—"

Asper grunted skeptically. "We're all what we are, Chantry, and a leopard don't change its spots. You won't change, and you know it. The kid—yes. The way you fixed his hands, he can do lots o' different things, but he'll never handle another card deck. But you—you won't change."

Chantry smiled wanly, and showed his own right hand, blue and swollen and misshapen. "I fixed myself the same way, John, when I hit the kid. I broke my own hand, too. I'll never handle another deck, either."

Asper didn't move or speak for what seemed a long time. His eyes went cold and appraising, almost hostile again. Then, abruptly, the big man arose and strode to the window of his portable office. Minutes passed while he stood looking out, in silence. Finally he spoke in a strange voice Chantry had never heard before.

"I had a hunch it would turn out that way. So I've got to tell you. Martha's in Chicago. I called her, long distance, this morning, to tell her about the kid and Nellie. She asked me about you, Chantry. She'd heard you were out, and she told me if I saw you to tell you she was waiting for you. I told her I'd tell you, but I didn't intend to. Not until I was sure."

A man can digest only so much at a time, and right then Chantry was already stunned by a happiness that expanded inside him until it hurt. So the full import of the lawman's words did not strike him until later. At the moment, the lawman's words reminded him of something else, something he had already wondered a lot about.

"You called Martha, to tell her the kid

was marrying. Why? I thought you hated the kid."

Asper turned, and his face was gray and drawn. But the coldness was gone from his eyes. Whatever had arisen inside him with the thought of Martha had been conquered. "I did hate the kid—until tonight. I hated you, too, Chantry. But I'm not big enough man, I expect, to hate without reason. And neither of you left me much reason to hate you, tonight . . . About the marriage, well, calling Martha seemed the thing to do, sort of. You see, Nellie is my daughter—"

Chantry nodded, as if he'd known that, from the first. And he half believed he *had* known it, somewhere deep in his subconscious mind. But only little by little did he realize how intensely Asper must have hated the kid—the son of the man he hated, making love to his only daughter, and Asper powerless to prevent it. And he began to recognize anew the tremendous strength of the man. He recognized too that Asper had hated him all those years largely because he, Chantry, had not been worthy of his friendship.

Only that night had Chantry proved his worthiness in the big man's eyes. And he saw that John Asper's respect and friendship would be as strong and indomitable as his hatred. And Chantry was coming to see how much he lost, in not coming to know the big man before.

"If you'll excuse the left hand," he said, "I'd like to shake."

John Asper took the hand and gripped it so that Chantry wondered if he might intend to smash his other hand, to make doubly sure that he did not go back to gambling again, when Martha was once more his wife.

"Now we better find the youngsters," the big man said. "I've already told the kid who you are, and why you did what you did, in the big tent. He's anxious to see you, again. So's Nellie. And I reckon that marriage ceremony is about ready. . . . They'll want to go to Chicago with you, to see Martha, too. And that train got hung up in here until noon. You can all still catch it, if we hurry."

Chantry was already hurrying. John Asper had to hurry also, to overtake him.

He pitted his one hundred and fifty pounds
against the steer's thousand.



ONE-MAN STAMPEDE-BUSTER

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

It was tough enough for Hurry Kane to be kept at his cook's flunky job, when he knew he had the makings of a cowhand. It was even tougher to watch the other hands squire around the boss' lovely niece. But toughest of all was to be thanked for stopping a bold-faced cattle-steal—by getting fired!

SPRING had come to the cow country, which means it was roundup time. With the robins and meadow larks had migrated also those booted and spurred birds that follow the cow. From livery stables, saloons and grublines they flocked toward the range, swapping the smells of moldy leather, stale whiskey and staler jokes for the fragrant breath of the wide open spaces.

Hurry Kane sat gloomily in the door of the V Bar cookhouse. No knight of the

saddle was Hurry, but the cook's flunky. The glamor of roundup had passed him by. Today his sadness was even more profound than he usually experienced at this gay season. For the boss' pretty niece, Allie Glenn, had come up from Cheyenne to go with the wagon.

Hurry remembered her, from last year's roundup. Since then he had tried hard to argue the boss into giving him a string. But here he was, still swamping for old Cimarron, the cook.

Hurry's cigarette hung dead from his lip. His eyes were blank. But his brain was feverishly active, desperately searching for some loophole of escape from his pot wrangler's sentence. Luke Jennings, one of the new hands, came toward him, spur chains jingling.

"Cimarron says for you to shake the lead out of your britches and get busy scrubbin' pots," he said, and added: "If you're tired of restin'."

Hurry Kane did not answer. He never had much to do with these drifters. Particularly, he had no use for a smiling man. Not only did Luke Jennings smile all the time, but he had a mouth full of gold teeth. More than that, he had made up to Allie Glenn since the day he got here.

"Aw, turn your face away," Hurry growled. "Them grinders is shinin' in my eyes."

"I'll tell Cimarron you said for him to go to hell," jeered Luke Jennings, the sun flashing a golden gleam from molar to molar. He turned away, his pearl-gray Stetson jauntily topping his six feet of bone and brawn.

"You do, and there'll be hash around here that ain't made outa cows."

Jennings laughed merrily, and went on toward the corrals.

Hurry ambled leisurely toward the big barn where bald, walrus-mustached Cimarron, with rolled sleeves and wearing a flour sack apron, was scrubbing the chuck-wagon cupboard with broom and hot lye-water. He drew his gaze from the hated scene, looking in the direction of the corrals.

Two hundred grass-slicked broncs looked wistfully through the bars to the blue hills they would not see again until roundup was over. He could understand what

those horses were thinking; he felt the same way, himself. In the round corral the boys were topping off their broncs, getting plenty of advice from the birds perched on the top rail.

There was a redbird up there, sitting between Luke Jennings and his partner, Speck. Hurry's slow-moving boots dragged to a stop. He stood gazing at the black-haired girl in the crimson silk shirt as at some beautiful and far-distant star. If only he—

A raucous bellow from the chuckwagon jerked him back to bitter reality.

"Git a move on an' start in cleanin' these here pots!" Cimarron roared, slamming down his broom.

"Aw, keep your shirt on," growled Hurry, but so low that the cook could not hear him. He sank down disconsolately on the bench beside the wagon, dipped a brush in lye-water and savagely went to work on a Dutch oven. MacLaren, the boss, had made him a flunky when he came to the V Bar, a green kid, seven years ago. But he would not always be a flunky. He had the makin's of a cowboy. All he needed was a chance to prove it.

"Loafin' ag'in!" yelled old Cimarron, darting from behind the cupboard, fire in his washed-out blue eyes. "Git to work, afore I—" Bracing himself, he swung the wet broom at Hurry's head.

With an ease born of long practice, Hurry ducked. He was so leisurely about it that he appeared bored. His scrub brush flashed around the sides of the iron kettle. "Anyhow," he retorted guardedly, "I ain't no danged dough wrangler, tetchy as a skinned rattler rolled in sand."

Cimarron glared at him, not quite sure he had heard the mumbled speech. "Git me a bucket o' hot water," he ordered. "An' don't let it git cold afore you git back, neither."

Hurry took his time in getting up. "You won't be always bossin' me round," he muttered.

"What's that!"

"I said, it looks sorta like rain." He emptied the bucket and started to the kitchen. When he came out, ten minutes later, he met Allie Glenn in the door. She was small and splendidly made, and freckles lay like flakes of gold on her milk-

white skin. Her lips put to shame the red of a wild strawberry.

"Why aren't you out there with the other cowboys?" she asked. "You can ride as well as they can. I've seen you do it."

Hurry was proud that she showed this interest, yet he knew she was gently rebuking him. "I'm goin' to have me a string, one of these days," he declared. There were so many things he could have told this girl, but he never could find the words. Always, in her presence, he groped for something to say. And afterward, when he was alone, he thought of a million things he could have told her. "We had a long winter," he said.

Allie laughed. "Did we? I didn't notice." She turned, as steps sounded behind her. It was Luke Jennings and Speck. Hurry felt as though a door slammed in his face. He picked up the bucket of water and went out. The cowboys did not even glance at him.

"Don't forget, I'm takin' you to that dance tonight, Miss Allie," he heard Luke Jennings say. He trudged on toward the wagon, weighed down with his bitterness. Old Cimarron stood waiting, bare arms folded across his chest, an icy glint in his eye.

"Flunky," gritted Hurry. "Hell!"



WITH rush of wheels and roar of hoofs the V Bar outfit left the home ranch for roundup. In the lead rode MacLaren, as pilot. Behind him Cimarron held the ribbons over his four-horse chuck-wagon team. Next charged the bed wagon, driven by the nighthawk. The third wagon, loaded with wood, and with water barrels roped to its sides, rolled in the dust of the others. Hunched on the seat was Hurry Kane.

Joyous whoops came from the riders who flanked the remuda thundering in the wake of the wagons. No sound came from Hurry's throat. His dead gaze was on Allie Glenn, riding between Speck and Luke Jennings. Even from here, he saw the gleam of Jennings' gold teeth. What he said must have been funny, for Allie's high laughter rang out above the rush of wheels and roar of hoofs.

About noon MacLaren stopped the outfit on the bottoms of Chokecherry Creek, and the wrangler built his rope corral. Old Mac gave orders: "Slim, you and Pecos take the outside circle and comb the draws clear on up to Wolf Ridge. Jennings and Speck, you start in up there where you see that bunch of junipers and work back as far as the drift fence."

Already cowboys were in the corral, roping out fresh mounts. Soon there was the thumping of hoofs and popping of saddle strings, as punchers took the rough off their circle horses.

Slim, straight, her face flushed and happy, Allie sat her horse beside her uncle Mac.

From his seat on the wood wagon Hurry tried to catch her eye. But Allie's admiring gaze was on Luke Jennings, as he skillfully rode out the bucks of a wall-eyed dun.

"All right!" yelled Cimarron. His blacksnake sailed out, the team leaped into motion, the chuck-wagon's front wheels flew off the ground. Hurry kicked off the brake, grabbed the lines and followed the racing wagons. An hour later they had made camp, and Hurry was digging the fire trench. Before he had finished, cattle began to drift onto the cutting grounds. His wistful gaze fixed on a rider charging down the draw, hazing a stream of tawny hides and flashing horns. Hurry swore, and went down to the creek for wood.

About two hours before sundown Allie rode in, and Hurry showed her the tepee he had put up on the creek bank. The cot was made up, a blanket spread on the ground, and on an upended box sat an apricot can filled with primroses. "I come across them posies up there a ways," Hurry said, red-faced, stumbling in his speech. "Thought maybe you might like 'em."

She bent over the creamy petals and turned to him a soft, smiling face. "I do like them, Hurry," she said. "I just don't know how to thank you."

"Aw, that's all right, Miss Allie." He wanted to tell her she was beautiful, that when she spoke all the birds stopped singing, to listen to her. He said: "The cow gather is startin' off good."

Her brown eyes looked directly into his, and his pulses jumped. "I spoke to Uncle

Mac about you," she said gently. "He says you haven't got the makings of a cowboy. I told him you have."

"You told him that?"

"And I asked him to give you a chance. But he just smiled. The trouble is, Hurry, you've been flunking too long. They think that's all you can do."

"Too darn long," he agreed. Then he took a long leap in the dark. "Would you like me a little better, Miss Allie, if I was a cowhand?"

Allie laughed. "Try it and see," she dared him.

"Then, I'm gonna make Mac give me a cowhand's job."

The way he felt then, he was confident nothing could stop him. But old MacLaren did, when Hurry cornered him that night. "This is a fine time to be bringin' that up," he said shortly. "You ought to be thankful for the job you got, the way times are. You'll keep on ridin' herd on Cimarron's pots."



THE days passed, to Hurry a galling monotony of moving camp, dragging in wood, and scrubbing dishes—and watching Luke Jennings grow more friendly with Allie. Daily, also, Hurry's dislike of the gold-toothed man increased. This ill-feeling flared into open warfare one night when Jennings deliberately spilled some of his coffee down Hurry's back.

"Scuse me, Hurry," he said in mock politeness, as Hurry jumped angrily to his feet. "I couldn't see you, for soot."

Hurry flung a fist squarely against the shining teeth. He followed the blow with another just as hard, and as Jennings staggered back, sank his fist wrist-deep in the man's stomach. Jennings folded over, groaning, suddenly white, both hands clamped to his middle. The punchers had scurried out of the way, and now Speck shot past them, shouting:

"I saw you hit him when he wasn't lookin'! Well, I'm lookin'!"

Hurry tried to dodge the headlong rush, but he was too late. Speck's fist rammed the side of his head and he sat down, jarred all over.

"Git up and whale the tar outa him,

Hurry," encouraged a friendly cowboy.

"Don't take that offa him!" urged another. "Knock his ears back so far he can use 'em for horns!"

"Let him try it," dared Speck. He stood wide-legged, fists doubled, his eyes narrowed and menacing.

Hurry looked dazedly around him. Jennings leaned against a wheel of the wagon, his face still and white. Cimarron's sour face looked at him from near the cupboard's apron. Then he saw Allie, her gaze reaching out to him more eloquently than words ever could. Hurry grinned at her, kind of dizzy. He started to his feet, eager to show her he was more than a pot washer.

Speck leaned forward. His fist rammed Hurry's forehead, flattening him. Hurry bounced up, taking a cruel beating before he was squarely on his feet. He spat the hot fluid from his mouth, bogged his head, and flailed mightily at the face that swam dimly before him.

Some of those wild blows struck their mark, the sting of hard-driven knuckles bringing to Hurry a savage joy. Toe to toe they stood, slugging, making no effort to dodge. Speck's right eye was half-closed, there was a cut on his mouth. Hurry's face looked like the underside of a fresh-skinned hide.

He became conscious that Speck was gradually backing away, and now he fought even harder. The lightning volleys of rights and lefts drove Speck upon the woodpile, where he stumbled. Muttering an oath, he stooped quickly and straightened up, swinging the axe above his head.

"Hurry—watch out!" Allie cried. The cowpunchers rushed forward.

Hurry did not hear her. By some miracle he grasped the handle of the down-sweeping axe. Grappling for the axe, the fighters weaved back and forth. Hurry tripped him, and as they went down together, both still holding the axe handle, there came a sharp, snapping sound. Speck lay on his back, motionless, his features warped into a mask of pain.

"My arm," he whispered, between clenched teeth. "He broke my arm."

Through the circle of silent, sober-faced men burst old Mac. "What's goin' on here!" he yelled, and stopped, looking

hard at the dangling arm of the man on the ground. "Who done it?" he asked softly.

Luke Jennings broke the silence. "Your flunky," he said. "Jumped on me first, then—"

"That isn't the truth," Allie broke in. "I saw the whole thing, Uncle Mac. Jennings started it. Then, when Speck took his side—"

"All right," Mac said bruskiy, and fixed his hard little eyes on Hurry. "You've laid up one of my cowhands," he stated. "I guess you're right proud of yourself."

"I never meant to hurt him, boss. I—"

"Shut up. You been after me to make you a cowhand. All right. You take Speck's place in the mornin'. Wait. Don't start grinnin' yet. You're goin' to do nothin' but ride herd!"



HURRY went toward the creek, to bathe his battered face. So he would ride day herd, until Speck was able to ride again. He would be on a horse but, otherwise, the job was as despicable as a flunky's. Riding endlessly around a bunch of bawling cows, from daylight till dark, while real cowboys rode circle, branded, and worked their cutting horses. . . . He looked up from splashing water on his face, to see Allie standing beside him.

"You're a wonderful fighter," she said.

"When I saw the way you was lookin' at me, Miss Allie," he said truthfully, "I felt like I could've licked my weight in wildcats."

She laughed, a sweeter sound by far than the silvery murmur of the stream. "You're improving," she said, dancing lights in her eyes. "You're almost as good at making love as Luke Jennings. When you get to be a cowboy, the girls had better watch out."

Hurry thought she was laughing at him. He said stubbornly, "I'm goin' to be one, all the same."

"Are you?" She was smiling up at him, her lips slightly parted, and her eyes seemed to say, "I dare you!" But before Hurry could form his confused thoughts into action, she turned away.

He started hungrily after her. "Now, what did she mean?" he asked himself, "when she looked at me thataway?"

The dreary days that followed brought to Hurry one consolation: Speck was now well enough to help old Cimarron. Often when Hurry stood night guard, he saw Speck ride away from camp. Going gal-lin', he thought. And he would look wistfully at the dim cone of Allie's teepee. Since the night of the fight, she had appeared almost to avoid him. But Luke Jennings spent all his spare time sweet-talking her.

He was holding the V bar stuff on the blue-stem bottoms around Eagle Butte on the day he watched Allie lope away from camp. He watched until her red shirt was a speck against the dark-green flank of the butte. Suddenly he pressed the rowels to his horse and loped toward her. He wouldn't be gone long. The herd was grazing peacefully. Anyhow—Well, he had made up his mind to tell Allie something.

He lost sight of the spot of red and, taking a short cut to the butte, came upon four V Bar steers trapped in a gulch. The walls were too steep to be climbed. There was a deadfall at the upper end of the trap, down timber choked the lower end.

"Somebody put them logs there," Hurry said aloud. He rode back toward camp, to find MacLaren. But Mac had seen him first; he came fogging across the flat.

"What you mean, leavin' the herd?" he barked.

Hurry told him of the trapped steers. "Somebody drove 'em in there," he said positively. "Come on, I'll show you."

"Don't believe a word of it," Mac snapped. "But I'll go with you. If they ain't there, you're fired."

"They're in there, all right enough. What I'm wonderin' about is who done it."

Before they reached the gulch, they met Luke Jennings coming in from his circle.

"He's got 'em," Hurry said. "I recognize that brockle."

"Trapped, were they?" Jennings laughed sarcastically when he heard Mac's question. "Well, they didn't stay in the trap long after I hollered at 'em."

The old man turned a cold eye on Hurry. "Just what I thought," he said.

But Hurry argued desperately that someone had trapped the steers, and finally persuaded Mac to ride to the gulch. Jennings went with them.

Mac's decision was quick. "Speakin' of traps," he said, "I've listened to yours for the last time. You're fired. Pack up and git." He turned his horse and rode away.

Jennings' smile was in strange contrast to the glint in his eyes. "You missed your callin'," he jeered. "Instead of a flunky, you ought to been a detective."

Hurry looked defiantly at him. "I was right, all the same."

"Sure. That's what the boss thought." His laughter rolled merrily over the hills, breaking into a hundred mocking echoes.

Hurry headed toward camp, his brain numb with shock. He could scarcely get it through his head that he was fired from the V Bar. To make his misery complete, he saw Allie ride out of a draw and join Luke Jennings. Now, whether he looked inward or outward, there was nothing for him to see. He turned his horse with the remuda and packed the saddle to the bed wagon. Speck sat on the wagon tongue, his arm in a sling.

"Not pullin' out, cowboy?" he gibed.



HURRY didn't answer. He reached into the wagon and pulled out his warbag. There was not much in it. Some extra shirts and socks, a pair of blankets, an old pair of levis. With the exception of a few things he had left at the bunkhouse, this was all he had to show for his seven years' work. Not even a saddle, or a horse to put it on.

"We sure goin' to miss you," Speck said, smiling twistedly. "The V Bar can't get along without a tophand like you."

Hurry slanted a look at him. "If you don't shut up," he warned, "I'll bust your other arm."

Cimarron looked up from the batch of sourdough he was mixing on the cupboard shelf. "You can bust his neck, for all the good he's doin' me," he growled. "I ain't had two-bits wuth o' help since you left. He's got to go gallin' every

night, an' ketches up on his sleep when he orter be helpin' me." His voice took on a gentler tone. "You ain't leavin' shore 'nough, is you, Hurry?"

"Mac fired me." Hurry flung the canvas bag to his shoulder. "Well, so long."

"Just a minute. Put down that bag." Cimarron reached into the cupboard and pulled out cans of tomatoes, peaches, apricots. "Stick these here in yore bag. The V Bar ain't settin' no man afoot on an empty stummock."

Hurry stared at him, deeply touched. This was the first time the cranky old dough wrangler had shown him a kindness. "But, Mac—"

"Dang Mac. If he don't like it, he can hire hisself another cook. Open up that bag, like I tell you."

The lumpy objects riding his shoulder were the only tokens of kindness Hurry carried away from the outfit that had been the only real home he had known. Mac was nowhere to be seen. Allie was off riding with Luke Jennings. . . . He had no place in mind to go to look for a job. But he wasn't thinking about that now.

He trudged across the flat to the gulch where he had found the trapped cattle. Careful examination showed him where a dead tree had been dragged to the gulch. That settled it. Somebody was trapping V Bar steers, whether the old man believed it or not. Maybe he could find another trap.

It was growing dark when he heard a distant cry: "Hurry! Hurry!"

He listened, incredulous. "That's Allie!" he murmured, and lifted his voice to a great shout: "Allie! Where are you?" Climbing a knoll, he soon saw her riding toward him. He put down the warbag and waited, his pulses thumping.

"I thought I never would find you," she called, and rode up beside him and dismounted. "What do you mean, going away without telling me good by?"

Hurry could never tell when she was laughing at him. He groped for words. "I didn't think you wanted to see me," he said finally.

"Didn't you?" Her voice was like soft music.

He felt the blood in his face. "I thought you was with Luke," he said.

Allie laughed. "Oh, him. But listen,

Hurry. I had a talk with Uncle Mac. Do you really think someone drove the cattle in there?"

"Sure as I'm standin' here."

"But who?"

"Could be 'most anybody. I was seein' if I could locate another bunch like that."

She smiled. "Is that why you left the herd?"

"Why, no, not exactly, Miss Allie. I know I ought not to done it, but I seen you—" He stopped, as a rider with a bandaged arm came over the ridge below them. "It's Speck, callin' on another gal."

Allie led her horse from the top of the knoll. "I don't know about that," she said. "I've watched him ride off, almost every night. He doesn't look like a ladies' man, to me. How do we know he isn't mixed up in this stealing?"

"I wouldn't want to accuse him like that."

"I'm not. Just thinking what might be. Let's follow him," she said, her eyes flashing.

"Not you," Hurry said. "You're due back at camp. Mac's lookin' for you right now."

"Let him look. Come on." She led the horse into the thick shadows at the foot of the hill, answering Hurry's protests with a gay, reckless smile.

"Well, all right," he was forced to agree. "But if we run into anything, re-

member you have to stay back." He laid his warbag across the saddle, and they followed the vague shape of the rider ahead. When the country leveled out in a wide bench, they thought it best to leave the horse behind.

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AFTER about a mile Speck disappeared behind a black wall of junipers. They followed the sounds of his horse into a gulch. Creeping up the dark, brushy channel, they heard men's voices. Whispering to Allie to remain where she was, Hurry stole soundlessly forward. He parted the screen of brush. At what he saw he held his breath.

Speck and two bearded strangers sat their horses before a barricade of down timber. Behind the barricade the horns of eight or ten steers glistened in the starlight. One of the strangers was saying:

"A few head every day mounts up. We'll soon have enough to make that drive."

"It's workin' out all right," Speck agreed. "Meet me day after tomorrow night at Crow Springs. We'll have some more."

A stick cracked behind Hurry. He whirled round, from the waist, a cold, tingling sensation at the base of his skull. He saw the shadowy shape of a man, the

*YOU'RE SMOOTH
ENOUGH
IN A BLACKOUT!*

*YES, IN DAYLIGHT
TOO. I USE
STAR BLADES!*

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gleam of his teeth. Luke Jennings was smiling at him.

They called him Hurry because he was so slow. But there was nothing slow about him now. Yelling, "I got you crooks!" he rushed past the startled horses and grabbed hold of the barricade. He stumbled when Jennings' bullet fanned his ear, carrying the dead tree with him. A steer leaped over him, another's hoofs plowed into his back. As he went down, he heard a thin, muffled cry. He knew it was Allie.

Rising into the chaos of plunging horses, bellowing steers and cursing men, he fought his way down the gulch. A dim shape, lying in the path of the rushing steers, seared itself on his brain. It was Allie, gagged, tied hand and foot! Even as he flung himself at the horns of the nearest steer, he knew Luke Jennings had sneaked up behind her and done this. The fear-crazed brute swept him almost upon the helpless girl before he was able to dig his heels into the dirt.

He braced himself, threw all his strength against the curving horns, pitting his hundred and fifty pounds against the steer's thousand. Inches only from the girl, the steer stopped, its mates rushing past on both sides. Not realizing that the danger was now past, Hurry struggled to twist down the steer. A small, hard object pressed into his side. Luke Jennings said: "Turn loose."

Hurry pried his fingers from the horns and spun on Jennings. "You—" He said no more. A flying noose caught him around the throat, jerked him backward. He clawed at the imbedded rope, gasping for breath.

Speck slackened the rope. "What'll we do with him, Luke?"

Jennings cursed flatly. "Get him away from here," he said to the strangers. "I don't have to tell you what to do with him."

"Turn here loose!" Hurry said hotly.

Jennings' teeth flashed at him. "You don't need to worry about her," he said. "From now on, I'm takin' care of Allie. All right, boys. Take him away—fast!"

"Not so fast, Jennings," spoke old Mac, behind them. The rustlers were paralyzed. "Close in, men."

Dark figures of cowboys, gun metal gleaming in their hands, moved quickly down the sides of the gulch. Speck and the other two men lifted their arms.

"You came just in time, boss," Luke Jennings said in a loud voice. "I was hopin' I'd have some help in bringin' in these cow thieves I caught."

"Why, you—" muttered Speck.

"Hold it," MacLaren said tersely. "I savvy now, Jennings. Figured somethin' was wrong when I saw you trailin' Hurry. Got to thinkin' them steers he found might 've been trapped, after all. And this explains Speck's night ridin'." His voice snapped like a whip's cracker. "How many V Bar steers you stole, Jennings, and where are they?"

Jennings maintained a surly silence.

"You'll tell me," Mac said. "Take 'em in, boys. And, Hurry— Say, where did he go, that quick?"

Hurry was kneeling beside Allie. As soon as her arms were released she reached them around his neck. "Now, hold still," she said, and kissed him on the nose.

"Lower your sights a little, honey," he murmured. He held her close to him, and they were still in each other's arms when Mac came up.

"If I ain't buttin' in—" he began, and stopped.

"He's the bravest man in the world, Uncle Mac," Allie said proudly. "You've got to make him a cowboy now."

"That's what one of the boys told me that saw it," Mac said. "Hurry, son, I'm right proud of you. From now on, you can take Jennings' string. And there's somethin' else in the back of my head. I'm an old man, and you're the only kin-folks I got, Allie. The V Bar will be yours, one of these days. If you and Hurry—" He paused, then moved discreetly away, hiding his grin behind his hand.

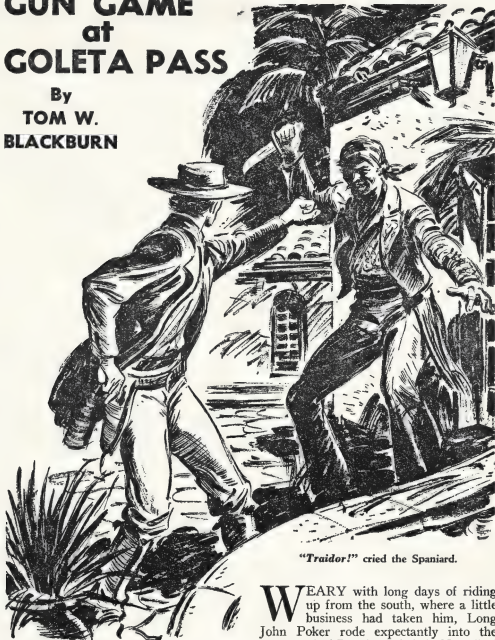
"Did you hear that?" Allie whispered.

"All I can hear," Hurry Kane declared, "is my heart a-thumpin' fit to bust. Do you sure-nough mean that, Allie, about lovin' me?"

She laughed happily. "Lower your sights, cowboy," she said, "and I'll prove it."

GUN GAME at GOLETA PASS

By
TOM W.
BLACKBURN



"Traitor!" cried the Spaniard.

Juan Poker, gallant highwayman and renegade dispenser of law, had to double-cross both Spaniard and gringo in a fast, red play to balance the scales of justice between two hostile peoples.

WEARY with long days of riding up from the south, where a little business had taken him, Long John Poker rode expectantly into the compound of Rancho Soledad. Not all of the proud and harried Spanish families on the ranches below the hills of the Mother Lode country would accept Juan Poker as a guest.

To many he was an unvarnished bandit, living by cold wits and a ready gun—a man who scorned an honest trade. Among these there was much talk of a

hanging at Monterey one soon day. To many of the rest, who held no real belief in the tales of his lawless pillaging, Juan Poker was merely another Yankee intruder in the sunny California valleys, and this was reason enough for enmity toward him. For there were ruthless men among the tide of gold-seekers pouring through the Sierra who saw a quicker way to riches than the shovel-and-rocker of the hills in the great herds and easy wealth of the valley ranches.

But at Soledad, Juan Poker had a friend, Luis Campodar was a wise old man who read deeper into a man's nature than his face and the ugly legends his enemies send after him. His house was open to the tall Yankee with the quiet voice and the quick hands.

Poker swung stiffly down before the tiled verandah of the great house, saw there was a light in old Luis' study, and smiled. Luis Campodar was the acknowledged leader of the *haciendados*. He was their counsellor and their friend. All that occurred in the valleys, old Luis knew in a matter of hours. Many an errand for Juan Poker had resulted from that knowledge. More than once renegades in the hills had been surprised by a tall and soft-voiced visitor before their plans of violence and outrage were fully complete in their own minds.

There was a belief in Luis Campodar, as there was in Long John Poker, that the bigness of California could in time hold both Yankee and *Californio*—as neighbors, at peace with each other. The two of them worked to that end—encouraging the law-abiding and scourging the renegade lawless of both races. Juan Poker had been absent from his friend's house for some time. Old Luis would have new problems and fresh work to be done.

For a moment Poker paused curiously in the compound, his eyes searching for a stable-boy. It wasn't like Rancho Soledad to allow a visitor to ride in without sending a peon out for the traveler's horse. He shrugged, finally, and started toward the study door. The shadows were thick under the verandah. He had only a sensation of impending danger—something which did not come from sense of sight or sound. He froze in his tracks, throwing an arm up. A man hurtled against him from the inner wall, jarring

him backward. The man's voice cried one word:

"*Traidor!*"

Then the man struck. Twisting, Poker caught the arm with the deadly knife, twisted it outward, and spun his assailant's body. Even as he rammed his fist at the white blur of the face, Poker was aware of a weakness in his antagonist. His knuckles landed squarely. The man wilted and fell against him. He lowered him soundlessly to the tiling of the floor and turned the face upward in the dim light. Astonishment filled him. He understood the impression of frailty in the other, now. The face belonged to Felipe, Luis Campodar's ancient, faithful major-domo!

Felipe had been second only to his master in his friendliness toward the Yankee who came often to Soledad. Yet he had leaped out of the shadows with death in his hand and the name of traitor on his lips. The major-domo must have mistaken him for somebody else in the darkness.

But if there was need for violence against any visitor in the compound of Rancho Soledad, there was also need of Long John Poker. Leaving Felipe where he was, Long John ducked across the verandah and pushed through the door into the study.

"Luis, what—?" he began. But he checked himself abruptly, his hand sweeping back for his gun.

The man behind the huge carved desk before the hearth was not the master of Soledad. His bland, round, mocking face was unmistakable. He was Luke Cressady, a gambler twice run out of the little settlement at Los Angeles by irate local authorities. There was a triumphant light in the man's eyes, as though he had been long expecting this caller. One hand was on top of the desk, its palm governing the black sheen of a gun. As Poker snapped for his own weapon, the man started to rise, clawing his own weapon up. Poker fired once, smashing the lamp on the desk. Then he wheeled and dove back out the door.

He moved so swiftly that his entrance and his leaving seemed to run together into one motion, hiding his instant's pause within the room. Racing across the verandah, Poker scooped up Felipe's frail,

limp body and tossed it across his saddle ahead of him.

He heard a chair go over inside the house as Cressady fought to get out of the suddenly darkened study. Then he was up in leather himself, wheeling his mount frantically. Down the verandah feet pounded toward the study. And from the doorway, which burst suddenly open, a strident voice shattered the night.

"Get him! Get him, you fools! It's Poker, himself!"

Even as he roared, the gambler fired. Poker felt the sinister caress of the passing bullet. A dozen yards down the verandah, another weapon winked at him. He snapped two shots at these widely separated targets so rapidly that the two explosions ran together.

Across the compound, from somewhere near the corrals, a rifle growled. But the

Just short of dawn, Poker pulled up in a thicket on a little creek back in the hills and poured a hatful of water over Felipe's face. The old major-domo roused slowly. Long John squatted beside him, his grin friendly.

"Feel better, old-timer?"

Felipe ran a gnarled hand over the blue lump on his thin jaw. His eyes cleared. But the welcome Poker expected did not come. Instead, tears of helplessness welled into the old eyes.

"To be old is a bitter thing, Juan Poker!" he said heavily. "I could have died a happy man if my arm had owned strength to put my steel into your black heart!"

Poker shook his head like a man trying to free himself of a numbing blow. There could be no mistaking the deadly hatred in the old man's voice.

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rifleman was shooting at shadows and his shot was wide. Poker's horse, as well trained in its master's quick business of attack and escape as a *vaquero's* pony was to a cattleman's trade, flattened and raced under its double burden. More shots flashed along the front of the sprawled house. But Poker was away.



A DESULTORY pursuit followed Poker for the first half hour after he hit the hills. But it made no really desperate attempt to come up with him. He had thought for a moment at the house—judging from the way Cressady had tried to tag him—that John Poker's carcass was important to whatever game the gambler had on the table at Soledad. But the fact that Cressady's riders didn't press pursuit too hard seemed to indicate this wasn't so. And it made Long John uneasy.

"What is this?" he snapped. "What's a man like Luke Cressady doing on Soledad?"

Felipe's lips lifted from his yellow teeth. "The wages of folly!" he moaned. "My folly as it was my master's. For both of us trusted you. The gambler Cressady has come with the drafts you drew against Luis Campodar. He's come to collect them—all!"

"Drafts?" Poker echoed stupidly.

Not all of the errands on which he rode paid their own expenses. There were times when he needed a little money to accomplish the things on which he and old Luis had decided. For a long time the *haciendado* had authorized him to write drafts against Soledad for such little cash as he might need. In a land which knew no banks, these drafts were the one way a man on a trail could obtain travelling money.

More than once Poker had sold such a draft to a trader or a merchant for a lit-

tle dust or some minted coins. But all of them together would total but a few hundred dollars. Many of them must have already come in and been honored by Campodar. If Cressady had managed to round up all of them left outstanding and now presented them for payment, they offered no problem to a man of Luis Campodar's wealth. Certain the *haciendado* expected to pay them when he gave the authorization.

These drafts could in no way explain the man he had found in Luis Campodar's study or the welcome which had greeted him at Rancho Soledad. Something more than this was wrong. He caught Felipe's arm in a vise-like grip.

"Where's your master? I've got to see him—right away!"



THE old major-domo looked at him out of disbelieving eyes. Slowly the old head began to shake back and forth. A puzzled line pulled at his mouth.

"Not even a Yankee could pretend ignorance so well," he said at last. "Perhaps it is because I want to believe it, Juan Poker, but I think you have not heard, after all—maybe Felipe has been hasty with you!"

Poker tightened his grip. "What is it?" he growled savagely. Felipe lowered his head.

"Luis Campodar is dead, *Señor* Poker. He was a grown man when I was a boy. But the years sat lightly on him until this Cressady came with his drafts—sixty thousand Yankee dollars worth of them. The old man looked at them, saw they were written as the others he has paid for you from time to time. But for such amounts! He refused to pay them.

"Cressady swore he had bought them in good faith and he stung the hot pride of the Campodars. My master agreed to them and surrendered Soledad as security until he raised the money. But he had loved you, *Senor*, even as Felipe. And you had betrayed him.

"A doctor from Yerba Buena said it was his heart. And it was, in truth. Broken, *Señor* Poker, by a Yankee man he trusted. He died in two days."

The major-domo stopped and scrubbed again at his face. Poker understood it all, now. The pride of the *Californios* was at once their strength and their weakness. His own Yankee hard-headedness cried out at the preposterous swindle Luke Cressady had worked on the master of Soledad.

At the same time, his understanding of the people of these russet hills sent a strong surge of pride through him at the courage of an old man who set so much store by his personal honor that he would surrender the ranch which had been his home for half a century to meet obligations he thought had been signed by a friend he trusted.

Cressady's plan was simple enough, and explained the gambler's attempt to kill him at the ranch. It was so simple that it would work smoothly if Poker, himself, didn't turn up to bring the whole thing down before Cressady actually had title to Soledad. Somewhere Cressady had come across one of Long John's expense drafts, had bought it, and had used it to make copies, drawn for huge amounts. He had brought these north and presented them as a banker would, claiming to have paid out face value for them on the strength of Campodar's name and reputation.

Long John scowled darkly.

"There is something more bitter than being old, Felipe," he said softly. "That's coming back to a friend's house too late to meet a need! Californians, Spanish or Yankee, owed Luis Campodar something much better than this. But even if he is gone, there's still the ranch. We're not too late for it! Luis might rest easy if his son was back in the Campodar house. Where's young Guido?"

Felipe spread his hands.

"*Ai*, the young, they are reckless! And they have no ears for an old peon's caution. Three days ago Guido sold two hundred head of cattle from the upper ranch. He's gone with this money to the game tables in the Yankee inn at Goleta Pass. He swears that first he'll run his few thousands into sixty there, and buy Cressady's claim to Soledad. This done, he's vowed he'll range the hills till he's seen Juan Poker hanged from the tallest sequoia in California!"

The old man stopped for a long moment. Then he went on.

"You talk of a bitterness in you, *Señor*; you talk of Guido again in his father's house. These are good sounds in my ears. If you would also but swear that Luke Cressady is no friend of yours and that it was not you, my master's trusted friend, who signed those drafts against Luis Campodar!"

Poker stood up.

"Felipe," he growled, "you're an old fool! It's not over a pair of miles as the crow flies back to the ranch. You go back and tell Luke Cressady what you've just told me; that Guido Campodar is at Goleta Pass, trying to run what money he could raise into enough to meet those drafts. Then you get busy with the peons. Butcher a yearling and get fires going in the barbecue pits. Rancho Soledad is due for a fiesta!"



POKER rode leisurely through the day, timing his crossing of the wide reach of valley between himself and Goleta Pass so that he would arrive at the far hills after dusk. He made a silent and unobtrusive approach to the sprawled inn at the foot of the pass and tethered his mount in a tongue of scrub timber which reached down nearly to the building.

Keeping closely to shadow, he approached from the rear and slid into the stables backed as a lean-to against the main building. His quick eyes ran over the horses in the stalls—quickly the first time to see if any were damp with the sweat of a long ride. Satisfied that Cressady had not yet arrived, he ran over the mounts again. It was no trick at all to discover Guido Campodar's beautiful palomino or the young *haciendado's* ornate saddle hanging on a peg. He called the stable-boy over and pointed to both.

"Who owns those?"

"A *Señor* from across the valley," the boy answered. "A player of cards."

"He's playing, now?"

"Pues, I do not know," the boy grinned. "But I think not. It is the time for eating."

Poker nodded. "Well, you go in and tell him there's a man out here wants

to know where he got that horse and saddle. It looks like a rig that was stolen from me."

The boy looked astonished, then trotted off toward the front of the inn. Poker stepped back into the shadows to one side of the stable door. Moments later footsteps rapped angrily out from the inn. A thin smile creased Poker's face. He had been certain his insinuation to the stable boy that Guido Campodar rode on stolen gear would be ample bait to bring the hot-headed *haciendo* out.

Campodar came through the stable door with threshing strides, the veins of his neck swollen with anger and his eyes searching the gloom of the stable for the loose-tongue Yankee who had sent for him. Poker stepped from his place beside the door and catching Guido's arm to steady his own stroke, chopped downward with the butt of his gun.

The young *haciendado* moaned softly and pitched forward. Long John caught his falling body, holstered his own weapon, and slid deft fingers inside Campodar's shirt. The lacings of the money-belt there came free and he pulled the belt out.

He lifted Campodar, then, crowded into the palomino's stall, and dumped the limp body into the hay trough under the horse's muzzle. He knew the animal would not be uneasy at the presence of its rider, and it was a likely place to keep Campodar out of sight. He found twine on the wall on an unused saddle-peg and bound the *haciendado* securely, using a strip of the man's own shirt to gag him.

When the stable-boy came back moments later, Poker was on his way around the other side of the building toward the entrance and there was no sign of anything amiss among the stalls.

Taking a room on the second floor, Poker sent word to the kitchen to send him up a dinner and to the bar below that he wanted word passed out to newcomers that there was a man above stairs who would take a party with good stakes at a card game. He washed the dust of his long riding from him, readied a table, and presently ate reverently of the meal sent up to him.

His meal was finished, the dishes had been cleared away and cards had been

brought to him when three riders thundered up to the inn. He recognized Luke Cressady as the first to swing down and he grinned thinly.

Moments after Cressady and his men swung down in front, the tender from the bar rapped on his door. Poker opened.

"Three men have just come in, *Señor*," the man said. "One of them would like to sit your game. But can he bring his two friends with him?"

"Certainly," Poker nodded. "But since he is a stranger, I'll cut the house in. Send up a dealer from your own tables and somebody else to measure stakes."

The bartender backed out. "But of course. In moments, *Señor*."

Poker set the chairs up, took his place behind one, and waited. When Cressady, who had ridden across a wide valley with the hope of getting Guido Campodar into a poker game and completely blocking the *haciendado's* hope of getting back his ranch saw the man with whom he was to gamble, things might happen quickly. It was for this reason Poker had checked the deal to the house. Witnesses to this game might be valuable.

As the bartender promised, the house men came up moments later. The man who was to measure stakes—that is, each player's ability to meet his bets, the value of jewelry he might offer, and the worth of his signature—took his place on the edge of the bed in the corner. The dealer picked up the pack of cards and started to run his finger under the seal. Poker stopped him.

"Put them on the center of the table," he said quietly. "We'll draw for seats—but not with cards!"

The dealer dropped the pack and turned curiously. At the same time, bootfalls sounded in the hall and the door swung open. Luke Cressady stepped into the room, his face split in a mocking grin.

"Surprised, Campodar—?"

Poker tossed Guido Campodar's money-belt down onto the table.

"That belt is worth as much as a packet of papers you have in your pocket, Cressady," he said coldly. "We'll play—winner take all?"

"John Poker!" the name came explosively from Cressady's lips. "You cutting yourself in?"

Poker shook his head. "No! You cut me in when you forged those drafts in my name. Campodar is tied up in the haystack of his horse's stall in the stable. He gets my winnings after I'm gone. The house men'll see to it. Do we play, Cressady?"



LONG JOHN knew Cressady had sprouted out his name—had asked his question only to give the two men behind him time to know something had gone wrong and that the wrong man faced them. He knew every passing second in which he didn't force the play raised the odds against him. But the two glassy-eyed house men who watched this tight scene were *Californios*.

Tomorrow they would speak freely of tonight. There was still much work for Juan Poker to do in this land and he had need of tall stories passing from *peon* to *vaquero* to *haciendado*—stories which would do more to build up faith in him among this superstitious people than any other thing.

Finally Cressady spoke:

"Sure we'll play!"

That was the signal. The three men moved as one. Cressady was the slowest of the three, but he was the only one of which Poker wanted to make sure, so he took him first. His bullet hit the man in the left breast, shattering his heart.

But Cressady had planned long and hard on becoming master of Rancho Soledad, and he died slowly. His gun finished its erratic jerk, tipped, and fired. The slug hit Long John in the upper arm, almost at the same time one of the men behind Cressady tallied with another along the ribs on the same side.

Those two hammer blows shook John Poker's long, hard frame, shock racing ahead of pain to jerk his breath from him. He staggered back a step and fired twice more with iron deliberation. Then his gun slowly lowered.

The two house men stared woodenly at the three men on the floor and at the lean-jawed fourth who stood with blood slowly staining his shirt front and smiled!

The dealer shook himself and bent over Cressady's body. His hand went inside

of the man's coat and came out with an envelope of papers. He pulled them half out of their covering and fanned their ends.

"These are the stakes?" he asked.

Poker saw a fair imitation of his own boldly-stroked handwriting on them and nodded. Holding onto himself, the dealer raked the money-belt across to him, spilling the unused deck of cards onto the floor.

"For the *Señor Campodar*—" he said. Then his breath broke and he bolted out of the door. His fellow, who had come to witness this game and measure stakes, followed him. The dealer's voice echoed in the hall, shouting for the innkeeper.

"*Patron! Patron*, come quickly! Bring bandaging and liniment! It is himself, that Juan Poker men talk of! And he has killed three wolves!"

Poker heard the liquid Spanish run together as the two men raced down the stairs. Pulling a kerchief from his pocket, he unfolded it and pressed it against the scored place along his ribs from which blood was welling. It would soon stop.

His torn arm was another matter. But somewhere high on the hills above Goleta Pass would be a shepherd's shack. And shepherds were notable healers and silent hosts as he already had learned more than once. What could be done at this Yankee stopping place on the pass road was done. Guido Campodar would soon be riding back to his ranch with both the money for his stock and the forged drafts which had broken his father's heart.

A new legend had been born about Juan Poker—a legend that at some other day among hills many days removed from these might rise up in troubled men's minds and bring allies to a Yankee who needed them in his work of balancing justice between two peoples in a new land.

Silently Poker swung his leg over the sill of his window, dropped to the roof of the porch beneath, and dropped from there to the ground. The stable-boy had heard the turmoil within the main building. He ran past Poker without seeing him. At a slow trot, cradling his hurt arm as he ran, Long John headed for the scrub thicket where his horse was waiting.

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SPOOKS ON THE PROD

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

Maybeso Mason had never learned to treat prospective buyers with kid-gloved gentleness, when he took the one man who might buy old Iron-jaw's spread on the wildest night ride that ever gave a rich tenderfoot a quick bellyful of ranching!

“**W**HAT'S the matter, my good man?” somebody rides up and addresses me sudden-like. “You look so low you may have to half-sole the seat of your pants!” It's Curtis Gilbert Shanks, in person, the Easterner who—so the Boss hopes—is fixin' to invest some of his dinero in the Rockalong outfit.

He slaps a fat hand across a spreading

thigh and laughs until seems like I can hear the seed rattle in his Adam's Apple. "Picked that one up from Tadpole Telk this morning. Good one, eh?" he cackles.

I'm hanging there in the saddle limp as a wet rag. My head is down and my ears are flopped. I'm doing some thoughtful thinking. I've got my tail in a crack and I know it. Looks like there ain't but one way out, and it may be deeper than out.

"I am sort of low at that, Mr. Shanks," I answers with a polite dry chuckle. "Looks like I'll be in a hole stoppin' dirt with my face come tomorrow." I sigh deep.

"Oh, come now. Come, come!" Curtis Gilbert straightens up from his bowed-over giggle-spasm and looks concerned. "It can't be that bad! Nothing ever seems as bad as it really is—I mean, nothing really ever is. . . . What's the matter? Maybe I can help you."

"I don't think you can, but you're shore welcome to try," I confide. "You know that Burning Powder hoss that the Boss's sun rises and sets in?" I ask him.

"Oh, yes. Yes. The flashy paint. Great horse—great horse!"

"Well," I admit, "I've let him break cavvy again and there's no one to hold the remuda together while I go after him. One of the boys could keep an eye on the cavvy while they work cattle, but if anything happens I'm in for it. It's a risk either way. I may not even find the cussed paint. And the Boss'll spit hot brimstone in the morning if his favorite cutting hoss ain't saddled and ready to go!"

"Then we must go after him," Curtis Gilbert allows. "Get one of the boys to keep an eye on the horses and I'll jog along with you. I want to see more of the ranch outskirts, anyway."

"But it'll be a hard trip, and—"

"Don't quibble my good man," this tenderfoot Easterner cuts in. His mind's made up. "I'll stay here and watch the horses until you ride over and ask one of the boys to watch them while we're gone. He'll only have to stop his cow work for a few moments when they stray a bit!"

I can see that this Curtis Gilbert is used to giving orders. The Boss has told us to do anything Shanks asks us to do. He's a mighty special guest right now.

The fattish little fellow has been out from the East a couple of times already for a ranch vacation on our Rockalong spread. Like I said, he's taken enough of a liking to it. He wants part interest in a ranch.

The Boss has hit a couple of bad years and is about to go flat broke. He'd welcome to sell a thirty per cent interest in the old Rockalong now to this fellow who's got more money than ranch sense, the way I see it. But he'd be a perfect partner for the Boss, at that. About once a year he'd spend three or four weeks on the ranch and, of course, would have no say-so in the running of it a-tall. But he could talk to the folks back home about it.

The idea seems to please him a right smart. He's done made up his mind about buying an interest in a ranch. And that's fine. But what's worrying the Boss right now is that he don't know whether Curtis Gilbert Shanks will buy an interest in our own Rockalong spread, or in the Eagle Claw ranch what's owned by old Mighty-Tired Mietzen. The Eagle Claw has the best fishing and this butter-ball dude from the East is plumb taken to the sport.

So the Boss has instructed us to gee-haw right peart-like when this Shanks fellow is around, and to show him every advantage of the ranch we possibly can. To hear us tell it, them thorns on the cactus were grown a-purpose to protect the blossoms from all hands but old Curtis Gilbert Shanks's. We're doing pretty good until this paint hoss breaks cavvy. . . .

I mosey on over and ask Tadpole Telk to keep an eye on the cavvy, that I've got to ride most of the night. When I tell him what for, Tadpole looks at me like he's just seen a fly spit in a spider's eye.

"Shore, I'll watch 'em for yuh," Tadpole's eyebrows lower. "I'll throw my bedroll down over there tonight and sleep with jest one eye shet. You shore better bring that hoss back, or yore hide won't be worth the price of a portable heater in purgatory come morning!"



THE way Tadpole Telk looks, I might have just owned up to backshooting the Boss. The boys are holding this beef gather beside a rain-

filled wallow. The herd's milling and bawling. Dust is thick and stands high in the air, and the sun's already making my shadow long on the prairie. I know



Maybeso Mason

Tadpole's right, so I get going. I pick up Curtis Gilbert Shanks and we head out on the long trail for old Mighty-Tired's Eagle Claw spread.

The Boss has bought this young paint from the Eagle Claw ramrod and the hoss hasn't got fully weaned away from his old stomping grounds, so ever so often he takes a yearning to visit the old ranch again. He took one of them yearns this afternoon while I'm watching the boys work cattle.

I didn't even see him slip out. It's my job to keep the horses rounded up and nearby, ready to ride in and cut one out every time one of the boys signals me for a fresh hoss. It's hard work on a nag working cattle like we do it when we're in a hurry.

The Boss had rode into town this afternoon and he won't be back on the range again until early next morning. Then is when he's banking on putting across a big show for old Shanks. He wants to show the Easterner what he can do on that paint cutting hoss. He's told me to have that nag saddled and ready to go early.

I try to keep my mind off it, but every time I think about how the Boss'll look in the morning if I ain't got that hoss saddled and ready to go, there's a sinking

feeling inside my stomach, like it's dodging the toe of an oncoming boot.

Old Ironjaw Innis is aplenty easy-going for a boss, but he don't stand for no foolishness where that cutting hoss is concerned. That Burning Powder is a right peart hoss at that. He's a bay with one stocking leg and a freckled jaw. Both eyes are a ragged white splotch the size of a saddle blanket hanging from his withers and laying back agin his right side.

We've all seen old Ironjaw ride him into a herd, slip off the bridle, and point out a cow. From then on, it's up to the paint. He'll take right in after that critter and nip its rump, careful not to throw a scare into the herd while he eases it out into the open. Once there, Burning Powder crowds hard and fast. He's quick as a cat when it comes to blocking a cut-back.

"Why hecks fire, boys!" old Ironjaw remarks one day. "I can take the bridle off that hoss and cut a tick out of a cow's flank without turning a hair! A thousand wouldn't buy that paint!"

"Yeah," Tadpole Telk had spoke up good naturedly, "and I'm one of the thousand!"

* * *

Old Shanks and I ride along silent for awhile. I'm sure hacked about letting that hoss take a powder on me and I'm not talkative. It's a good fourteen mile ride to the Eagle Claw, and I'm thinking that maybe I'll have to search the ranch for that hoss after I get there.

This evening's a weather-breeding, if I ever saw one. Thunderheads are boiling up out of the northwest and milling like thirsty cattle. They're bunching up to the north now and forming a solid rain bank. She's a black one, moving down fast, and rumbling sort of threatening-like.

The light's yellow, and the air's charged with something that quickens a man's heart beats and makes him uneasy. It's the sort of weather that puts snakes and tarantulas on the crawl and makes the old prairie wolf howl lonesome from the high ridges.

Old Shanks casts a worried eye to the north. "Looks like we might have a storm that will blow our teeth out!" he opines.

"Don't know if it'll blow our teeth out

or not," I give him my thoughts on the situation as she stands, "but it's apt to be wetter'n a drowned tadpole!"

In no time the sun's shut plumb out. The light changes from yellow to green. Things just don't look real. There's a sort of glimmering glow that makes your belly quiver. The bunch grass bows down under a head wind that moans dreary like across the prairie.

"Maybe you better ride back to the ranch!" I lean over and holler against the wind.

"Curtis Gilbert Shanks don't turn tail and run when a little danger threatens, my good man!" the fat-belly hunk of grease calls out, and I let the proposition lay as she is.

Riding straight into the storm makes me shiver like a dog in the wet. Looks like this blow'll sure be a trash-floater and a gully-humper, and I'm wishin' there was some place to take cover in.

The wetting I know I'm in for probably won't hurt me none, but if old Shanks gets sick, I'll be in for more mangy trouble. Even with him riding there beside me, this approaching storm makes me feel lonesome enough to howl with the wolves.

Ragged lightning's streaking from one horizon to the other. When a blinding bolt rips into a green live oak to the right of us and leaves a scattered pile of stove wood in its place, maybe I do howl a little.

Then I sight a shelter up ahead. The storm's standing up on her hind legs and whooping now. It'll be raining any minute too. Hurry or no hurry, I figure we'd better hole up in that shack while the worst of the storm blows over.

"Some experience, eh?" old Shanks allows, piling off his nag.

I don't know it then, nor does he, but that "some experience" statement ought to have been saved for later. . . .



THE shack's vacant and shambled up a right smart. It ain't big but there's plenty room for doubt in my mind when I look inside through the half opened door. She shore looks spooky. It's got one big room, a smaller back room, and a front gallery with a sagging roof.

But me and old Shanks drag off our saddles, and I shove open the squeaky old door with a cautious toe of my boot. We drop our saddles in a corner, and I squat down in front of a winder to watch it rain.

The drops come then, scattered and big. They hit the ground hard and kick up the prairie dust like throwed rocks. The air smells damp and rain-waterish. It's a good feeling to be in there out of the wet, but it uneasies me a little when I notice how old Shanks keeps looking back over his shoulder watchful-like.

He's squatted there beside me peering out the window, and once in awhile he sort of shivers all over. It ain't exactly cold but I'm doing it too. He's got me looking back over my shoulder before I know it. Them ragged streaks of lightning just lights up the old shack enough to show how deep the gloom is. She's sure a spooky affair.

I know we ought to go over the old place and check up on it, but somehow I'm not very anxious to stir around. Kinda tired, I guess. . . .

The rig that Shanks man is wearing would be enough to scare the tar out of a brave man, there in the lightning flashes, if he didn't know what it was. The man's sure dressed outlandish. You take a dom-inicker rooster, tie a spotted silk bandanna around his neck, slap a black and green vest on him, gray striped pants with a razor edge press, picture-topped boots, silver spurs and two .22 caliber pistols in hand-worked leather holsters, and you've got a pretty good idea of how old Shanks looks.

The storm looks like she's gonna last for a spell so I tell old Shanks that we better get a wink of shut-eye. We'll be needing it plenty before daylight. So we stretch out on the floor, using our saddle blankets for a pillow. . . .

When the hair starts crawling on the back of my neck, I know there's eyes watching me. All of a sudden my blood turns to ice. The storm howls. Thunder rolls. Lightning crashes.

I'm lying on my right side, face to the wall. Old Shanks is in between me and the wall. Makes a man feel mighty exposed being on the outside, that way, and it's hard to make up my mind to turn

over and look in the dark back of me.

The more I think, the harder it is. And while I'm trying to work up courage my stomach flounces like a fish outa water. My breath nearly quits altogether.

Seems like it's a good five minutes before I can look around. When I do, there's a ghost standing in the middle of that room—a female ghost in a white wrap.

Her hair's shiny gray, stringy as the frizzled end of a rope. She's grinning at me, showing the one tooth in her head. It's a dog tooth and busted.

There ain't no grin in her eyes, howsoever. They're green, with yellow lights in 'em. And they're blazing like the eyes of a cornered wolf in a stand-off fight.

Me—I'm paralyzed. Can't move, can't think. All I can do is lie there and whimper like a lost pup in a snowstorm while my toes curl backwards in my boots.

I don't remember ever rousing old Shanks but he's turned over now, propped up on a left elbow. He's looking at the ghost when the lightning flashes and there's a funny sort of gurgling noise in the bottom of his throat.

We'd probably of laid there until our hearts quit ticking if she hadn't raised a claw finger at us and croaked: "And I looked, and behold a pale hoss; and his name that set on him was Death, and Satan followeth thereafter!"

How I manage to grab up my saddle, untie that hoss, and land in the middle of his back all in one jump is a thing for a man to figure on. I can't explain it. All I know is that before the she-ghost drops her hand, I'm hooking spurs to my dun nag and lifting him across the low places in that prairie road. Whether I'm riding the saddle or it's riding me I can't say. But if I didn't have it to hang onto, chances are I'd raise off that speeding cayuse and fly.

Funny how a man forgets things like friends and such at a time like that. I'm full two hundred yards away from there before I think about old Shanks. When I do recollect him, a sort of cold wave runs up my backbone and chills the chill that's already there. I can just see that she-ghost with her bony fingers around old Shanks' neck, laughing hideous-like as she chokes him to death.

But when I look back over my shoulder I see Curtis Gilbert Shanks not twenty yards behind. He's riding bareback, leaning low, splitting the rain with his face. Under one arm old Shanks has got his saddle blanket and under the other he has a death-hold on the saddle. I'm considerable relieved to see that he's made out so well.

I do all right until my hoss makes a sudden turn around the head of a wash and I keep going straight. I light in the bottom of that gully, using my ear for a landing slide. Old Shanks' hoss rushes up, sees me scrambling around in that wash, snorts boogered-like and throws on the hoof-brakes. His rider comes sailing off over the nag's head and lands beside me with a smack. The soft mud breaks his fall.

"What do you make of it, old man?"

Shanks asks, making a stab at rising.

"Fust time I ever had a run-in with a doggoned ghost!" I allow, glancing down our back trail. There are still waves of chills coming regular up my backbone—durndest feeling a man ever had.

"Didn't believe in them before, but I sure do now," old Shanks' voice sounds like a clod-hopper hopping too low over dry clods.

When I try to get up, I find an arm run through one saddle stirrup up to the shoulder and a boot shoved through the other one up to my knee, and I'm down on all fours.

The rain's rattling on my back and my teeth's rattling in my head. Both hosses are boogered and have left plumb out. Altogether, she's a pretty discouraging proposition.

While I'm unbuckling a spur to free my boot from the stirrup, I hear a shout up the trail. On the second try, old Shanks manages to raise a holler. He looks over at me like he's plumb uncertain about whether he's yelling to another ghost, or maybe just a dead man. But pretty soon a gent rides up wearing a yellow slicker and leading our cayuses. He's picked them up on the trail ahead.

This gent's a neighboring rancher, and claims he's hunting his ma. Says the pore old woman loses her mind every now and then and runs off down to that old abandoned shack, which is the old homestead.

He invites me and old Shanks to help bring her back. I'm plumb certain that he'll find her back at the old shack, all right, and that's the reason I turn down his offer.

I don't add that he hasn't got a hoss and a catch rope strong enough to drag me back to that old house, even with the ground slick as it's getting.



LIGHTNING rips the sky wide open as we take the trail again. Thunder loosens the flood gates wider and the rain spills out like a wash woman emptying her tubs on a tin roof. She's a gully-humper and a rock-floater. In a couple of minutes a sluice of water the size of a well-rope is following the crease of my backbone. My boots are running over at the tops. And she's blacker'n the inside of a grave at midnight. A man can't find his face with both hands.

I'm still jumpy as a cat on ice, and I keep remembering the words that she-ghost says to me: "And I looked, and behold a pale hoss; and his name that set on him was Death, and Satan followeth thereafter!"

Well now, I'm riding a pale hoss and I'm willing to admit that Satan's riding close on my tracks all right! But that death business is what gives me the creeps. Does she mean I'm Death, or that I'm fixing to die? I sure am a right sorrowful cowhand on this ride. Old Shanks looks considerable drooped, too.

I feel like a rustler riding the owlhoot. If I get off this night with my life and don't bring back that hoss, I'll durned

shore get my hide pulverized in the morning when the Boss finds his cutting hoss gone. And it looks like old Shanks has done pretty much soured on the wide out-of-doors ranching life already.

If I'm also the cause of him not buying an interest in the Rockalong spread, old Ironjaw Innis will remodel my carcass and sell my skin for fourth-grade skunk hide. . . .

When the rain slacks off and I begin to make out the dim features of shadowy trees and boulders, I see that second ha'nt riding the midnight trail with us. Old Shanks sees him too, and he's already spurred on ahead twenty yards before I can hunker down in the saddle and bog my rowels.

That blamed ghost ain't no more than thirty yards to our left, riding in the same direction we're going! I can't see the hoss he's riding, but I can hear the mud sucking at the critter's feet.

Now if you think that white shadder floating along beside us in the stormy dark ain't a scary sight, try hollering sometime when you're paralyzed. I try now, but nothing comes out but a hoarse croak. I can already feel old Death's cold fingers reaching for my neck. Then I fade away from there so fast the air smells scorched.

Old Shanks calls back over his shoulder, "Ride for your life, man—the damned country's full of spooks!"

That doggone ha'nt sticks by us. We can't outrun him, so I hollers for old Shanks to pull up and we'll let him pass. But that blasted ghost slows up with us.

Then for the first time that night I remember my old .44 hawglaig hanging suggestive-like on my right hip. In an-

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other second it's spouting streaks of fire three feet long. I empty the gun and snap them spent shells, making certain I ain't missed one.

Well sir, folks in the know claim a bullet don't have no effect on a spook, but I prove different tonight. I either down this ha'nt for good or throw a scare into him that changes his direction of travel. We don't see no more spooks right away, either. All that keeps us company from there on to the Eagle Claw is our imaginations. But they're a plenty!

We're both surprised when we reach the Eagle Claw corrals alive. We leave our spent nags in the big lot and head for the house. I'm a relieved cowpoke, and I'm smiling wide.

But I've jumped the gun, because I've forgot about that long lane leading from the corrals up to the house. It's bordered on both sides with thick rows of salt cedar. There's a hair-raising story to be told about this lane and I tell it as we walk. It's pitch dark there among them salt cedars. We're afoot too. We keep throwing quick glances back over our shoulders.

I tell old Shanks this story then. The Eagle Claw colored helpers told it to me about six months before. They say it's gospel. I want old Shanks to feel as much at home and as peaceful of mind in this ghostly old lane as I do.

These colored brethern claim that one night a man by the name of Robson was walking up this lane when his worst enemy slips a knife in his flank and walks around him, leaving nothing to hold the man up but his backbone. Robson screams himself to death right here in this old lane. Since then, on dark, stormy nights especial, his spirit comes back to ha'nt the place where he was kilt. The colored folks claim they've seen Robson's head resting on a fence post at midnight and fire streaming outta his ears.

Me and old Shanks know how they can add right considerable to a yarn, and on any ordinary night we wouldn't of given this story a second thought. We're not men to spook easy or get all in a lather about restless speerits of the dead. But tonight things is different. Me and old Shanks are fast getting to be ghost believers. We're acting downright bashful around the critters. Old Shanks is look-

ing four ways at once and walking so close to me he's rubbing a blister on my left side.

I reckon the reason I don't see old Robson's ghost is because it's laying in wait for me on the ground, instead of on top a fence post. The first I know is when it raises between my legs with a snort and heads for the house in a buck-jumping run, me astraddle of its back.

I squall once, and die for the third time tonight. Old Shanks lets out a sort of croaking groan and it seems like he don't know whether to follow me and that ghost or run the other way. I try to jump clear of this spook, but my muscles won't work. I'm a goner and I know it. Death's finally caught up with me, and old Satan's following close behind!



IT'S old Mighty-Tired's yard dogs that save me from this death ride. They hear my squall and come out from under the door steps, baying savage.

Robson's ghost stops sudden. I keep going. I hit the ground running like a turpentine cat. These are biting dogs that old Mighty-Tired keeps, but I run right over them and straight through a window. I'm brought up sharp against the far wall with a window sash ringing my neck and broke glass falling all around me.

I'm squalling at the top of my voice and the dogs come yelping through the window after me. They tie into me like I'm a chicken-thief.

Then old Mighty-Tired comes running with a lantern in one hand and a bed slat in the other. He fights the dogs off and snorts, "Why—Maybeso Mason! What the consarned—?"

I tell him that I've just rode old Robson's ghost then and he allows as how I'm crazier'n a cockroach in a hot skillett. He drags me back down that dark lane. The lantern light shows my tracks leading right a-straddle of a dry spot where a cow's been laying up.

I feel sheepish enough to pull wool out of my ears. Mighty-Tired says come on and we'll go feed my nag and undress him. He heads for the crib to shuck some corn and I go get the horses.

Now I've been so bumfuzzled from riding Robson's ghost and nearly getting et up by them bad dogs that I've plumb forgot to worry about what's happened to Curtis Gilbert Shanks. The first I think of him is when I grab the reins of both our hosses and start leading them toward the crib.

"Been tryin' t' catch yuh for a month, yu corn-stealin' thief!" old Mighty-Tired shouts mad-like. "Now I got'cha!"

He's mortally poring it on old Shanks by the time I run up and start pulling him off. It takes the space of half a dozen more socks in the face and some fluent cussing from old Mighty-Tired before I can get the old coot to listen.

When I tell him it's Curtis Gilbert Shanks who's run in the corn crib by a ghost the dogs have turned back, old Mighty-Tired's face looks like he ain't got enough sand left in his craw to irritate an infant's eye.

He apologizes all the way back up to the house, then beds us down comfortable. Still my skin is as bumpy as a swiveled-up lemon. I tell old Mighty-Tired about

the white ghost that rides beside us, after telling him what we've come for.

His eyebrows lower and he says he bets six bits it's that Burning Powder hoss. That ragged white splotch the size of a saddle blanket hanging from the nag's withers and laying back agin his right side makes the paint look pretty spooky at night.

Old Mighty-Tired smiles kindly at old Shanks and says he'll leave us to sleep for awhile and will wake us up when that hoss strays in. He sure is trying to overdo his kindness now that he's made such a bad blunder on a man he hopes to sell a part interest of his ranch to.

I ought to feel good now that the ghost business is cleared up, but there's a hot flush on my cheeks that's threatening to bust out in blazes any minute now. I can see it plain. That paint hoss took the rougher ridge route. It's slower going.

We made fast time, too, for awhile when that she-ghost took out after us. So we just about caught up with the hoss where the ridge route swings back and merges with the prairie road trail. The



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nag wanted to travel with us, maybe craving company on such a lonesome, stormy night. When I think of them empty shells in my old .44, it makes me sick.

The farther she goes, the deeper my tail's in a crack that I know now is bound to lead to purgatory. I ain't content to burst up the Boss's show in the morning. Hell, no! I got to queer the deal on this ranch buying business, and shoot old Ironjaw's almighty precious hoss!

In the morning, I thinks, I'll get up and ride leather for a new range. I don't see how a cowpoke can do what I've done and face a man like old Ironjaw Innis come tomorrow.

My head's hung low, my ears droop. There's enough tuck in my tail to curl it, and I can wipe my face with the slack in my stomach.

Old Shanks is mighty quiet. I know what with the deal I've handed him tonight, plus old Mighty-Tired's shellacking him for a burglar—well, he's burnt out with ranch life.

There's a ruckus out at the corrals then. I hear a hoss running. A gate slams, and pretty soon old Mighty-Tired busts in and beams, "That ornery paint's in the corral. I saddled up and waited for him to drag in. He shies off corrals, so I had to rope the scamp. He's ready to go any time you want him." I'd already told old Mighty-Tired about getting back.

"We'll stay over until morning," Shanks speaks up for the first time in a spell. "I want to talk with you about a little deal, anyhow."

"Mighty fine, mighty fine!" the old Eagle Claw boss bellers. "I'll have a steaming hot breakfast waiting for you!"



AFTER old Mighty-Tired leaves out, Curtis Gilbert Shanks turns over and grins at me. "Thought there for a while that you had cooked your own goose. You must have been so scared you couldn't hit the horse!"

"Must have," I agree, appreciative.

"Oughtn't to get stirred up like that," old Shanks seems in a talkative mood. "Everything always comes out all right—generally."

"Maybe, but something's gonna happen and it won't be all right when the Boss don't have his hoss in the morning early. And when he hears you've bought interest in the Eagle Claw. I'll get a raking over the coals that'll leave my hide withered!"

"No need for worry, my good man, no need for worry!" old Shanks assures. "For the last half hour I have been thinking deep. I like both ranches. I like you. I like the excitement we had tonight. You don't get such things back East. I couldn't decide which ranch I wanted to buy into, so I have decided to buy an interest in both. My money might as well be doing something. Costly for it to be lying up, these days. As for the horse, your Boss won't wish to demonstrate until I get back anyway. I'll even tell him that *you* were the deciding factor in my making up my mind to buy into the Rockalong."

It's too much all at once. I lay there and sweat cold beads of relief perspiration and sigh one sigh right after the other. It's good to be alive at a time like that.

"Another thing I've been thinking about," old Shanks goes on. "Our ghosts have been pretty well explained. But a man can find an explanation or a reason for everything if he tries. You don't really think there are such things as spirits, do you?"

"Durned right there's ghosts!" I say quick. "I never believed in 'em before tonight, but just too many things happened to us all at one time, sort of. Maybe there ain't real ghosts," I'm thinking hard, "but the sub'stutes shore look natural!"

"Yes they do," old Shanks agrees.

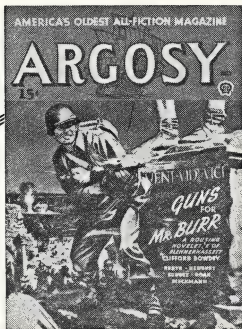
"What do you think about real ghosts?" I ask him.

"Tush, tush, my good man!" he says, turning over on his stomach. "Everybody knows there is no such thing as a ghost!"

"Then if we were fresh fed, rested and ready to go back, would you strike out now at two o'clock in the morning?"

"I wouldn't ride back down that trail in the dark," old Shanks is truthful, "if I had the whole U. S. Army in the back of me!"

"That's what I'm getting at," I say and turn over on my side for some shut-eye. I'm sleepy, and purty tired too. But, man, I'm happy. . . .



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• • THE DRIFTER MAKES A HAND



By **FRED GIPSON**

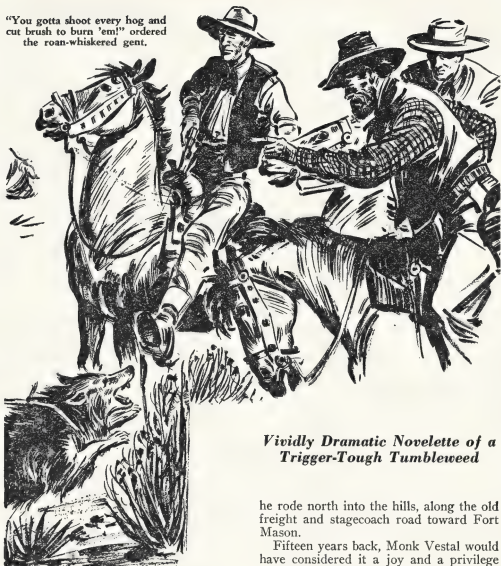
CHAPTER ONE

Gun Wages

'An aimless drifter at forty, Monk Vestal knew he'd continue to tumbleweed his life away. . . . Until he found a pair of courageous cotton-topped kids trying to do a job that would throw and hog-tie a grown man!

WHEN that smart-alec deputy turned Monk Vestal out of the Kerr County jail that morning, gave him a sound cussing and told him to drift, Monk drifted. Without a word of back talk.

"You gotta shoot every hog and cut brush to burn 'em!" ordered the roan-whiskered gent.



Vividly Dramatic Novelette of a Trigger-Tough Tumbleweed

he rode north into the hills, along the old freight and stagecoach road toward Fort Mason.

Fifteen years back, Monk Vestal would have considered it a joy and a privilege to crawl the hump of that big-mouthed deputy for such talk. Even now, he'd have hammered a lot of brag and cockiness out of the little duck's strut—if he'd considered it worth the effort.

That was the thing about it. He didn't consider it worth the effort. He knew it wasn't fear that held him back. Every man has some fear in his make-up, but Monk Vestal knew he had less of it now than in his hell-raising younger days. Time, Monk reckoned, was what held him off. Time—and that nagging alone—

It didn't surprise the little deputy. He had himself figured for a tough gunhand and a hard man to shave. He thought the tall, solemn-eyed puncher who'd worked over that slick-fingered town gambler with a beer bottle last night was afraid of him, now that his likker had died out.

It didn't even surprise Monk Vestal a whole lot. Monk had come to a time of life where nothing much surprised him. But it did make him wonder a little as

ness that came more and more often of late to crowd in where once there had been only a wild thirst for excitement and adventure.

That was the thing that had Monk Vestal bothered. Not the cussing or the orders to get out of the country. One town or the next, it was all the same to him. As far back as he could recollect, he'd been drifting. Any real purpose he might have had at the beginning, he'd lost somewhere along a wild and carefree back-trail that zigzagged from Texas to Montana, from California to Nebraska. And now he was back in Texas, dead broke and drifting. No direction. No destination.

He rode with his head down, unconcerned with the country he passed through. He rode and kept reviewing that little scene he'd witnessed from the jail that morning. A young man drawing water out of the town well for his blue-eyed wife and cotton-headed toddler of a kid. Drawing it up and tipping the dripping oaken bucket so that a little water spilled down on the kid and made him jump and holler and run. And then the little booger returning with a gap-toothed grin and crowding back under the bucket, wanting his daddy to spill water on him again.

No, it hadn't been much of a scene. Just a man and his wife and their kid. But when a drifter wakes up in jail on the day he's forty years old and witnesses a scene like that, it can sure stick in his craw. There'd been a certain unity in that laughing group, a unity and warmth a drifter never quite got to know.

It was early July. Doves mourned in the mesquites. A soft warm wind blew gently from the south. The air was fresh and clean and laden with the ripe, fruity odor of wild flowers withering and going to seed.

Monk Vestal straightened in his saddle. A hard, saturnine grin touched his long jaw. Hell! He'd seen himself some country in his time, hadn't he? More than that young bird back yonder would ever see. He'd rode good horses and drunk good whiskey. He'd known many blue-eyed women. That's the sort of life he'd chosen and he'd led it. Too late now for regrets. A man couldn't turn back time.

And the chances were that if he could, the pattern would come out the same.

Monk Vestal made himself a smoke and lit up. A man couldn't have everything.

But a mile farther along the road, he was riding with his head down again. Riding and thinking about a young couple and a grinning kid that liked to have water spilled on his cotton-topped head.

A drifter can get mighty lonesome sometimes. . . .



IT WAS after sunup and next morning when Monk Vestal rode up on the south bank of the Llano River and found an outfit in a deadlock at the water's edge. A couple of barefooted kids and three shaggy shepherd dogs were trying to put a wild-hog herd into the rough shoal crossing and having no luck. The hogs weren't taking it.

There were about fifty head in all, mostly sows and shoats. But there was a scattering of big, rangy, long-tusked old barrows, too, scrappers from the ground up. They were the kind that range-hog raisers like to leave in the brush to protect the sows and pigs from the depredations of wolf and panther. There was no scare in those old barrows. They didn't know what a booger looked like. Once riled, they'd fight anything they could get to. As Monk Vestal had heard one old brush-popper put it, "A wild bar hog just don't give a damn!"

To all appearances, these didn't. They'd backed up to the water and faced about, rumbling and popping their frothy teeth and daring the boys and dogs to crowd them further. One of the boys had waded out into the shoals beyond the bunch. He was rattling a sack of shuck corn, trying to toll them into the water.

The other kid stood on the bank, chunking the hogs with rocks and clubs and urging the dogs on. Now and then a dog charged the tight little band, baying furiously. Each time he was turned back by a vicious lunge from one of the bristling barrows. The hogs had made their stand and they didn't aim to budge.

Monk Vestal took in the situation at a glance and quartered upstream to give the boys a hand. At the same instant, the

kid out on the bank lost his temper and rushed the hogs with an upraised club.

Both the rider and the kid out in the water shouted a warning. It did no good. An old barrow with his sandy hair standing on end lifted his snout and charged with a roar.

There was no time to think what was best to do. If that big killer hog hit the kid, he'd cut him in two. In a swift, continuous, almost unconscious flow of movement, Monk Vestal drew his six-shooter. He shot the savage brute between the eyes.

The hog dropped sideways as if his feet had been knocked from under him. He started squealing and kicking. One of the shepherd dogs piled on, grabbing an earhold. The frightened kid leaped to the safety of a dirt bank as the maddened band left the water in a wild charge. Monk Vestal spurred his horse into the gap, turning them, holding back the stampede.

He looked up at the kid standing white-faced and shivery on the bank. "That was crowding the mourners, son," he said.

The second kid came splashing ashore in an excited run. He was a little bigger than the first but with the same tow-head and blue eyes. "If Ma'd seen you pull a fool stunt like that," he accused, "she'd bust your tail, Shad. What're you trying to do, anyhow?"

"What I'm trying to do," flared the first kid resentfully, "is put them hogs on the yonder side of this water. And I'm gettin' a bellyful of their balking, I'm here to tell!" His voice was high and sharp. He'd had a bigger scare than he wanted to let on.

"You like to not been there to tell it. Giving them bar' hogs a chance to rip out your guts!"

"Maybe you know how it's done then," jeered the younger boy.

Monk Vestal grinned and interposed. "I tell you what," he suggested. "Let's drift 'em downriver to that big deep hole yonder. Lots of times you can make a hog swim water he won't wade."

The boy with the corn sack said: "If you figure it'll do any good. They just about got us buffaloed. And if me'n Shad don't make it into Fort Mason with this hog drive before sundown, us Onion Creek Mitchell's is in one hell of a pickle.

Get around 'em, Shad. Chouse 'em on down!"

Suddenly he halted and looked up at Monk Vestal, his clear blue eyes boring, half-suspicious. "Hold on a minute," he said. "What's your name, Mister. Where you from?"

Monk Vestal met the frank and curious gaze. "I'm Monk Vestal," he said soberly. "From nowhere much and heading in that direction."

"You ain't one of Walt Baker's tough hands?"

"Who's Walter Baker?"

"He's the crooked underhanded lying snake that'll throw us Mitchells off our place and take over, if me'n Shad don't make a hog sale before night and pay off a mortgage. If you're one of his bunch, Mister, you'd best clear out before we set the dogs on you!"

Monk Vestal wanted to laugh, but he held it. "I'm on my own," he assured the kid.

The older boy looked at his brother. "You reckon he's lying, Shad?"

The drifter turned to face the searching gaze of the younger boy. Shad Mitchell studied the long rider for a full minute, then lifted a bare toe to scratch a mosquito bite on the calf of the opposite leg. "He ain't lying, Hop," he said with conviction. "He saved me from gitting hog et. I reckon he'll do to take along."



WITHOUT another word, the boys started easing the hog herd down the river bank. Monk Vestal fell in with them. He didn't quite understand it, but he couldn't recollect when it had made him feel so good inside to be judged and then accepted.

He studied the kids as they worked the hogs through a tall stand of cockleburrs. The biggest boy was maybe twelve, the other around ten. The one called Hop wore an old floppy black hat that evidently had once belonged to a man. Shad's shaggy top was crowned with some sort of a skull cap. Best Monk Vestal could tell, it was the top of a woman's black stocking, cut off and tied up with a piece of fishing cord.

Both wore frazzled overalls that had

been patched and re-patched till little of the original garments were left. And their bare feet looked as tough as the hoofs of a cow. Monk Vestal reckoned they were as safty a pair of little shavers as a man would ride onto in a lifetime. He liked them.

"You boys making the drive afoot?" he asked casually.

"Why not?" demanded Shad. "We made the roundup afoot. Just me'n Hop and them three hog-dogs. These boogers was wilder'n corn crib rats when we choused 'em out of the brush along Onion Creek. It don't take a horse to make a wild-hog gather, Mister. It just takes guts!"

"Shad's braggy," Hop said confidentially. "He likes to tell it scary. We made this gather afoot because the two old crowbait hosses Ma's got couldn't stand the gaff. We'd a-rode 'em today, though, if Ma hadn't been working one to a double-shovel, laying by the corn crop."

"I wasn't bragging," Shad protested wrathfully. "I just said we made this hog gather afoot, and that's what we done!"

Monk Vestal looked the pair over a second time with mounting interest. "A man," he observed emphatically, "has got a call to brag some, if he can make a wild hog gather like this afoot. Didn't figure it could be done."

Shad looked pleased. "It ain't the first time," he bragged. "We had a bigger bunch than this two weeks ago, but them Walt Baker hands stomped 'em for us before we could make it into town."

"And Ma won't let us pack guns," complained Hop.

"If I'd had a gun," declared Shad, "I'd a-belly-shot me some coyotes, that's what I would. I'd a-had 'em kicking and hollering and wallering all over them mesquite flats."

"How come they stampeded your hogs?" Monk Vestal wanted to know.

"Walt Baker don't want us to pay off that mortgage," explained Hop. "That snake-bellied son's got his eye set on our outfit. He aims to kick us out and throw open them springs to water his cattle. It don't make a damn to him if we ain't got no other place to go."

"Your pa dead?" asked the drifter.

"Yeah. Three years ago," said Hop.

"Rode a whiskey jug to his grave. But if he was alive, he'd have that bunch ducking into their holes mighty quick."

"You bet," Shad said proudly. "Pop was tougher'n a boot. Ride anything that wore hair, Pop could."

Monk Vestal swung his horse out around the drive, aiming to turn the leaders back toward the river again. The water ran deep here, from bank to bank, without perceptible current.

"Maybe," he offered, "you boys could use me on this drive. Providing we make this crossing."

"We could use a hand," admitted Hop. "Leastways, a gunhand. But we ain't got no money to pay wages."

"You've got grub, ain't you?" said the drifter.

"Cornbread and sowbelly," said Hop. He pointed a thumb at the corn sack he was packing.

"It'll keep a man from starvation," said Monk Vestal. "I've worked for less. You've hired a hand."

Hop looked at Shad. Shad handed the look back. Then they both looked up at the drifter and grinned.

"Throw 'em in the river, gunhand!" Hop directed happily. "Git to earning them wages!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lead-Law Ultimatum

LIKE the drifter had figured, they made the crossing without a hitch. Given a little time, the hog herd took to the swimming water without crowding. A big barrow waded in first, sniffed loudly, then struck out for the willow-bordered bank on the far side. Others fell in behind him. Three minutes after the first one took to the water, the whole herd was strung out in a long queue. Each gradually sank as he swam, till by the time they'd passed mid-stream, only their long upthrust snouts cut V-shaped wakes in the smooth surface of the water.

Monk Vestal reached for Hop's sack of corn and grub before putting his horse into the river. "You boys better take the dogs and skin out for the crossing."

Hop looked at Shad. Shad handed it back. They grinned and plunged into the

water beside the horse. They hit for the far side with long-reaching strokes. They and the dogs were already scrambling up the shelving north bank and taking over the hog herd when Monk Vestal's horse touched bottom with his feet.

They nooned in a bend of Comanche Creek. They shaded up under the widespread liveoaks and tall pecans and ate cold cornbread and warmed-over sowbelly and washed it down with black coffee. The coffee was made in a battered molasses bucket and bitter as gall.

Monk Vestal pitched an empty tin cup back into Hop's grass sack and leaned back to roll a smoke. He was listening in amused silence to a hot argument Hop and Shad had started about whether a coon washed every bit of grub before he ate it. Locusts hummed drowsily in the oaks and the hogs grunted and splashed as they wallowed comfortably in the coolness of the creek water.

The argument chopped off as suddenly as if cut with a knife. Monk Vestal came alert. Both boys had sat up and were listening. There was the clicking sound of horses' hoofs on rocks and all three dogs left the creek to come running into camp, their bristles up. All three were growling.

Three riders rounded a grove of wild persimmon out away from the creek apiece. They sighted the drovers nooning under the shade and swung in that direction.

Hop looked at Monk Vestal. "All right, gunhand," he said bitterly. "This is it!"

"Gimme a gun, Mister! Gimme a gun!" urged Shad excitedly. "It's them three

Baker hands that stompeded our drive the first time!"

"Set still!" cautioned Monk Vestal. "Your Ma had a reason for not letting you out with a gun. I'll handle this!" He got to his feet.

The men packed Colts and saddle guns. The oldest of the three was probably in his early thirties. The youngest twenty, maybe. The oldest man's stubble of beard was a dirty roan, his eyes pale gray under sandy brows. He was scowling as he rode a little ahead of the others. He was about ten feet away from Monk Vestal when he pulled up.

"Just where do you think you're going," he motioned toward the wallowing hogs, "with that drive of diseased hogs?"

"We're heading," said Monk Vestal, "for a slaughter pen in Fort Mason. And if them hogs are carrying any disease, it's a fighting one."

"Them hogs has got cholera!" asserted the roan-whiskered gent. "Everything south of the Llano's got cholera. You're infesting Walt Baker's range here and we don't aim to let you move a step further till you've shot every head and cut brush to burn 'em!"

One of the other cowpunchers laughed. It was an ugly laugh. Both the Mitchell kids came to their feet, their eyes glittering. Shad had a fist-sized stone clutched in one hand. A dog growled.

"Take 'er easy, boys," said Monk Vestal. "We ain't scared much yet!"

"We could make it a complete wipe-out," said the heavy-set puncher. "Nobody'd catch on if there were a few human bones in that burnt pile."

"Maybe!" drawled Monk Vestal. "But



"I'll have to see it done to believe it."
"Stranger," said the man. "You don't know who I am!"

"That's right," agreed Monk Vestal. "On top of that, I don't give a damn. We've started to market with this hog herd and that's where we still aim to wind up!"

There was something about Monk Vestal's eyes and talk that stopped the man. His pale gray eyes shifted.

"Why don't you step down, Lige," said one of the others, "and drag some of that paw and beller out of him. We'll see that you don't come out on the tail-end."

"Step down," invited Monk Vestal, "and cut loose your wolf!"

"Drag it out of him, Lige," grinned the youngest rider. "I've seen you salt down bigger and uglier ones than this'n!"



THE roan-whiskered rider slid down out of his saddle. He unbuckled his cartridge belt and hung his guns on his saddle horn. Then he shucked out of his bullhide chaps and kicked them aside. He grinned flatly and started rubbing his brush-scabbed hands together.

He was a good five years younger than Monk Vestal, bull-necked, heavy-shouldered, and with a chest like a barrel. He came at the tall drifter slowly, like a pit bulldog. Monk Vestal unbuckled his cartridge belts and pitched them toward the boys.

"Keep 'em off my back, buttons," he directed. His spirits sang. The years fell away from him. He felt like a young man again.

Monk Vestal could move fast and, in spite of his years, he was all man. He side-stepped, caught both the big man's hands and swung back under him. His rawhide body jerked forward and he yanked. The heavy-set rider was hurled completely over Monk Vestal's head and slammed against the ground like a sack of salt.

Instantly, Monk Vestal was on the man, with his bent knees gouging into the pot-belly. He caught the man by both batting ears, yanked his head up and slammed it against the ground. The second time he did it, the man grunted, stif-

fened, then went limp on the ground.

The men on horseback went for their guns. Both the Mitchell kids dived for Monk Vestal's belt. Shad got a gun first, came up with a squall, and fired. His lead went wild, but the dogs had already charged the horses, snapping at their hocks. One horse started pitching. The other squealed, reared high, and started walking backwards on his hind feet, trying to regain his balance.

Both riders were out of their saddles and sprawled on the ground by the time Monk Vestal got to his feet and took a gun from the prancing Shad.

The burly rider with the roan whiskers sat up slowly, wiping blood and dirt from the back of his head.

"I reckon that's all, boys," said Monk Vestal.

Hop stared up at the drifter, unconcealed admiration lighting his young blue eyes. "Mister," he said, "you work cheaper and git more done than ary hand I ever seen!"

"Pop couldn't a-done no neater job," admitted Shad. "Not with a jug of hard likker under his belt."

"Pitch them guns at my feet, tough hands," Monk Vestal said harshly to the two armed riders. "And don't start no monkey moves you don't aim to finish."

The men scrambled to their feet with dazed looks in their eyes. They pitched their guns at the drifter's feet and backed off.

Monk Vestal grinned. "And now boys," he said to the kids, "go catch up them loose horses. I got a notion these gents is wore out. I got a notion they'd admire to set and shade a spell. And while they're at it, I don't reckon they'd raise no big ruckus if you borrowed their saddle stock for the rest of the drive. It's about time we throwed them sick hogs back on the trail again."

The boys whooped. "I'm a-riding that cat-footed sorrel!" declared Shad.

The youngest rider jerked erect and started toward Monk Vestal, his fists clenched, his face purple with rage. One cold bleak stare from the drifter stopped him. He turned back without a word and flung himself down in the shade of a pecan.

"When Walt Baker hears about this—"

the heavy-set roan-whiskered man began. "He'll take it and like it, just like you done!" cut in Monk Vestal.

He turned to find Hop gazing at him, a devilish grin twisting his young mouth. "Mister," he said, "I'm raising your wages. Tonight you get a double-sized hunk of cornbread, if me'n Shad have to make out on branch water!"

A moment later, he was back leading two horses, deep concern puckering his eyes. "I been thinking, Mister," he said. "I been thinking about Ma and the little uns. Me'n Shad better pull out for Onion Creek, right now. We figured maybe Walt Baker wouldn't catch on to the fact we was making this second drive. But seeing he has, he's liable to be heading for Onion Creek right now, aiming to throw Ma and the little uns off the place. I know that frog-eyed son!"

Monk Vestal looked at the boy and then at the disgruntled tough hands that squatted in the shade and grumbled in undertones.

"You still got to cash in on these hogs before sundown," he said bluntly. "Put 'em on the trail and string 'em out. Tell me how to get to your Ma's place on Onion Creek and I'll see that she's still got a roof over her head when you boys get back. You got anybody in town you can trust with that money till Baker lays that mortgage on the line? A good witness?"

"That hog buyer," said Hop. "Name's Ringer. I reckon he'd see that we don't get slipped a raw deal!"

"He's from Santone," put in Shad. "He'll stand back of us till our bellies cave in."

"All right," said Monk Vestal. "You tell Ringer what that money's for. You make him go with you to pay Baker. If Baker's there, he can't refuse to take pay in front of a witness. If he ain't there, Ringer can back you up in your offer to pay."

"Me, I'll set and shade with these long-haired dogs a spell and give you boys a lead they ain't likely to close up afoot before sundown. Then I'll head for Onion Creek. If this Baker comes prowling around, I reckon I can make out to be the welcoming committee."

The boys left out with the hog drive,

each riding a horse and Hop leading the extra. Monk Vestal spent the next hour lazing in the shade of a live-oak, with the growls and bluster of Walt Baker's gun toughs to keep him entertained. Then he untied his horse and set his saddle.

"When Walt Baker finds out about this—" snarled the man with the roan whiskers.

"You done said that one," said Monk Vestal.

He swung up, grinned faintly back over his shoulder, and rode off down Comanche at a running walk.

CHAPTER THREE

Frog Eyes—in Person

THE kids were too intent on the striped watermelon between them to hear the approach of Monk Vestal's horse in the deep sand of the trail. They were twins, if the drifter had ever seen a pair. Two little old tow-headed boogers, about five years old, and brown as a pair of Mexicans.

They stood knee-deep in watermelon vines. One had a dusty foot propped upon a three-foot melon that had stripes on it in the pattern of a diamond rattler's back. The row of melon vines lay alongside a strip of corn that was in full tassel. The corn was rank and dark green, standing as tall as a man on a horse.

Monk Vestal pulled up to look down over a zigzag rail fence at the little tykes.

One said: "If I knowed it was ripe, I'd shore pull it."

The second said: "We couldn't pack it outta the patch."

"We could bust it," said the first. "I could get me a rock and bust it and eat it right here."

"Yeah, and Ma'd bust our tails, too."

The first kid considered. "A watermelon like this would be wuth a tail-bustin'," he said finally. "I bet it's got a red heart in it as long as my leg."

"Yeah. If it's ripe. If it ain't ripe, we've wasted the best watermelon in the patch. Ma wouldn't stand for that."

"I wish I knowed if it was ripe."

Monk Vestal chuckled and called down to them. "See if its belly's white. It ain't ripe till its belly's white and getting

creamy colored. Take a look and see."

The boys started guiltily. They stared at Monk Vestal, then grinned sheepishly. The drifter knew those clear blue eyes. He didn't have to go ask questions to know that here was some more of the Onion Creek Mitchell clan.

"Let's look," said one.

He bent down and stuck his little rump in the air as he strained to roll the melon out of its bed.

"It's belly's white!" said his brother.

The other let the melon roll back into place.

"See about the curl," said Monk Vestal. "The closest one next to the stem where the melon's tied onto the vine. If it's dead, that cinches it."

They squatted and stuck their cottony heads together, peering down into the tangle of vines. One looked up, frowned, then bent down to look again. Finally, they both came slowly to their feet, dejection standing out all over them.

"The curl's green."

"Greener'n hell!"

Monk Vestal clucked in sympathy. "Better let it lay awhile," he advised. "That's too good a melon to cut green."

The boys looked at one another, the corners of their mouths drooping as if the day were a complete loss.

Monk Vestal said: "You the Widder Mitchell's boys?"

"We're two of 'em," said one. "We're Hamp and Flim. We're twins."

"I allowed as much," said the drifter, "from where I set on my horse. Which is Hamp and which is Flim?"

The kids looked at each other, then tucked their chins in embarrassment. Both started digging in the sandy loam with their bare toes. Finally, one got up the courage to answer.

"We can't recollect," he said meekly. Then he brightened. "You go ask Ma, Mister. She's laying by corn the other side the field. You go ask her which one of us has got a mole on his belly."

"I'll do that—" grinned Monk Vestal — "but maybe you boys better come along. I figure your mama'll maybe want you when I've talked with her."

"Could we ride?" inquired Hamp—or Flim—hopefully.

Monk Vestal nodded. "Grab a saddle

string and coon up," he invited them.

He held one of the twins in the saddle in front of him and the other sat behind, clinging to the cantle. They rode down the trail. They rounded a clump of black-jack oaks at the end of the corn rows and Monk Vestal pulled up short. Then he carefully backed his horse a few steps.

A woman in a sunbonnet stood leaning against the handles of a double-shovel plow. She was talking to four riders who'd pulled up on the opposite side of the fence.

"You boys slip down and sneak into the corn," the drifter said. "Looks like your mama's in trouble. We'll have to get her out of it."

He swung down and followed the boys into the tall corn. They pushed eagerly ahead, slipping through the corn as quietly as hail.

"Hold on," the drifter cautioned. "We're playing hide-n'-seek with them gents. We don't want them to see us just yet."

Eyes wide with excitement, the two little ones kept to Monk Vestal's heels. They moved quietly toward the group talking across the fence.



AT THE edge of the corn they stopped. They were behind the woman. Over the fence three mounted men sat in their saddles. A fourth man had stepped down off his horse and had his elbows resting on the top rail. He was short and squat and had milky blue eyes that bulged out of his head like a frog's.

"Hop called Walt Baker frog-eyed," the drifter thought. "By all the signs, that's the bird yonder."

The woman was speaking, her voice tense and frightened. "You've no right to be telling me to take my children and get off this place. We've—"

"But my dear Mrs. Mitchell," Baker cut in with an oily voice. "Your husband borrowed money from me and gave me a mortgage on this run-down farm. He never could make the payments. I've let it run over three years. It's due again today. I've got to take possession."

"I still think you're lying, Walt Bak-

er," the woman said with spirit. "Jeff Mitchell told me he paid off that mortgage six months before he died. I don't think Jeff lied to me about that. But we want to do what's right. So me and the boys have been trying to pay it off again. My oldest boys are in Fort Mason right now, selling wild hogs the little fellers caught out of the brush, aiming to make that last payment. When that's done, we're through. We won't be bluffed and scared off our land!"

Walt Baker's milky eyes did not change expression, but his voice was full of mockery. "You have a fine spirit for a mother, Sally Mitchell, but your facts and reasoning are all twisted. Your boys may have started for Fort Mason with a hog drive, but I regret to say that they never did get there."

Thin, high fear lay in Sally Mitchell's cry. "What have you done to my boys? What's happened to Hop and Shad, Walt Baker? If you've harmed my boys—"

Walt Baker's voice, harsh and domineering, cut in. "You've got till sundown to round up your brats and plunder and get them off this place, Sally Mitchell. I've trifled with you long enough."

Monk Vestal didn't wait to hear more. The old, well-remembered fires were burning inside him. He stepped out of the corn with a gun in each hand and the cold harshness of his voice startled the drowsing plow horse till he rattled a trace chain.

"Brother," he said, "you don't know what trifling is. Get them hands up and don't tempt me, you under-handed, low-lived critter!"

The squat man's complete surprise was ludicrous. His hands shot straight up and his bulging eyes seemed to stand out on stems.

"You three monkeys can ape him," the drifter said grimly to the riders. "Reach."

They lifted their hands. They stared uneasily at the tall man who stood just out of the waving corn with the sunlight glinting on his two guns.

Monk Vestal's cold eyes slid back to the squat man on the ground.

"If you'd stay in your stinking office where you belong, Mrs. Mitchell's boys would be paying you off before night. But I'm glad you ain't. Because I reckon from the looks of them frog eyes and what the

lady says, you ain't got no money coming. It's my bet that you're just lowdown enough to try running a whizzer on a woman and a bunch of kids that ain't got no man to see they get their rights. But they got one now. Mr. Monk Vestal, to you! And I want to see that mortgage with Mitchell's name on it before you get another cent of money. Now rattle outta here and don't you come back!"

Walt Baker decided he wasn't going to get shot down in his tracks. He got his eyes partly back in his head and resumed some of his habitual arrogance.

"Stranger," he blustered, "I don't know how you come to be cutting cards in this deal, but I'll tell you one thing— You're taking in more territory than your shadow will cover. You'll learn that right sudden. Just what makes you so certain that hog drive ever reached town?"

"Because," said Monk Vestal, "I was giving the boys a little lift when them three gun toughs of yours jumped 'em, aiming to make a clean kill of the whole outfit, hogs, dogs, boys and all. They didn't get the job done, Frog Eyes! Now, dry up and get a move on!"



WALT BAKER turned and waddled over to his horse. He swung up into the saddle and looked back over his shoulder. "Don't get the notion," he said with bleak fury, "that this completes the deal. You'll see us again." He raked his horse savagely and swung into the brush, followed by his riders.

Monk Vestal watched them out of sight, then turned to Sally Mitchell. She stood gripping her plow handles with bloodless hands and staring at the gaunt, square-shouldered man. The twins clung to her skirts, grinning.

"I'm thanking you, Mister," Sally Mitchell said. "I'm thanking you for this and for taking care of my boys. They didn't get hurt?"

"No ma'am," said Monk Vestal. "We all made out fine." He grinned back at the twins, avoiding the woman's eyes. There was something about the clear blueness of them that stirred old memories and dreams long cast aside.

One glance had told him the woman

was beautiful. Dusty clothes and an enveloping sunbonnet couldn't hide that. She looked exhausted and worried; yet there was a supple youthfulness about her that was striking. Monk Vestal reckoned she'd married young and loved a lot to withstand hard work, children, worries, and come out with that much youthful beauty. He shifted his feet uncomfortably under the woman's penetrating gaze.

"Hop," he began, "told me about you and the twins. Hop was worried. So I come back."

He looked up. Vast relief showed in Sally Mitchell's eyes. "You're a good man, Monk Vestal," she said. "You come on up to the house and I'll put on some coffee. Seems like we ought to kind of celebrate when somebody comes along wanting to help out. I hope you aren't just letting yourself in for a lot of trouble."

Monk Vestal grinned. "Just between us," he said, "you don't have no idea what a heap of satisfaction I'm getting out of this trouble. But we better forget the coffee, I reckon. Figure it would be best if you and the little uns taken my horse and left out for a day or two. At least till the boys get back. That Walt Baker duck'll be back here, quick as he rounds up a bunch of hard cases to side him. And you'n the twins will be in danger."

"You think that's necessary?" said Sally Mitchell. "You think he'll really come back?"

"I'd bet on it, Ma'am," said Monk Vestal. "He's gone this far, trying to crowd you folks off. And now that them boys is in town, he knows he's got to get possession before they get a chance to pay him off. Or he won't have a leg to stand on. You got a neighbor, I reckon, where you'd be welcome to stay?"

"Yes," said Sally Mitchell. "I've got neighbors. "But—but what about you, Monk Vestal?"

"You forget about me, Ma'am," said Monk Vestal. "I've taken care of myself for forty year, come yesterday. I'll make out!"

"If it weren't for the children—" began Sally Mitchell.

"I know," said Monk Vestal, looking straight into her blue eyes. "You'd stand and fight to the last ditch. But somebody's

got to look out after the little uns. So let's don't argue no more about it."

"No," said Sally Mitchell thoughtfully. "I don't think you're the sort of man a woman could argue with long, Monk Vestal."

She led the children off toward the house of a neighbor.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Curly Wolf

THE cabin stood on a high bench overlooking the creek. It stood under towering live oaks, from which hung a mustang grapevine. It was a two-room affair, with a front gallery. It was built of logs and chinked with adobe and roofed with clapboards riven out of post-oak. To the left, a bold spring gushed from under moss-hung limestone ledges, leaping down to fill a series of deep limpid pools for a mile or so down the creek.

Monk Vestal had to go down and examine one of the pools for catfish. They were there, some good ones. He could look down into the clear water and see them, along with big old rusty sun perch. He could imagine the sport the Mitchell kids had along that creek. He could remember back to the time when he was a kind and spent most of his time swimming and fishing.

He walked up on the flagstone gallery and looked out across the creek. The cornfield lay just the other side, green blades and tassels glimmering in the sunlight. A flock of geese waddled up the creek bank, one old gander strutting and honking and whipping his wings. There was a couple of milk calves in a pole pen down by the barns and a herd of white silky-haired kid goats romping on top of a stack of cordwood.

This was a home. Monk Vestal could not only see it—he could feel it. A home, where work and life and love went hand in hand, a place a kid would grow up to remember and revere long after he'd maybe drifted into the outside world. Maybe it didn't have a lot of monetary value. But the thing it stood for was priceless. Only one who'd made the home, or one who'd never known such since he was a patch-seated button, could understand that.



A light winked in the willow across the creek. . .

Monk Vestal thought of the popping frog eyes of Walt Baker and mounting sullen anger began a slow burning inside him. He left his saddle gun propped against the door jam and stepped inside. He was in the kitchen. His eyes fell on an array of colorful china dishes lining a shelf on the far wall.

"It'd be a crying shame if they got broke," he muttered.

Carefully, he removed the dishes from

the shelf and stacked them in an empty wood box back of the kitchen stove. In other ways he made the place ready for what he reckoned was bound to break. In the other room, he found a corner walled off by a curtain hanging from a wire. He felt a little guilty as he drew back the curtain and looked behind it.

There were only a couple of dresses hanging there. But they were all starched and ironed and done up as only a country-woman can care for the few pretty clothes she has. One was white, with bits of blue ribbon here and there. The ribbon was faded a little. Monk Vestal let the curtain fall. Eyes that had seen what his had didn't belong to look upon a fifteen-year-old wedding dress.

He went back out and sat in the doorway and twisted up a smoke. But he didn't light it. Instead, he sat there and let a cold bleak ferocity take hold of him, without trying to check it. So this was the place Walt Baker was going to take away from a blue-eyed woman and four little old cotton-topped kids!

Monk Vestal sat there with an unlighted cigarette between his grim lips and forgot to keep an eye out for riders. He sat there and tried to recollect some of the things he'd fought for in times past. He couldn't remember many. They were too trifling, he reckoned. A dance-hall girl. A sneering remark from some whiskey-wild cowhand. Jughead bronses that men said couldn't be rode. Things of no consequence.

The sun went down. The milk cows came up and bawled at the cowpen gate. Monk Vestal got up and took a bucket and his saddle gun down to the lot and milked them. He came back and hunted in the kitchen for something to eat. He grinned when he found a couple of chunks of cornbread and cold bacon. He wondered if Hop and Shad had to make out on branch water. He ate and then went back to sit in the doorway.



TWILIGHT came, thickened to purple dusk. Back in a deep canyon behind the house a horned owl set up a hooting. Monk Vestal could tell it was in a deep canyon by the re-

sounding echoes. Frogs set up a tentative piping down the creek. The drifter stirred uneasily. Maybe he'd figured it wrong. Maybe Baker and his bunch wouldn't hit at the house; they might just decide to start tearing down the fences.

He got up to ease his cramped muscles. A light winked in the willows across the creek. A slug whipped through the doorway where he'd been sitting, followed by the report of a rifle.

Monk Vestal flung himself to the floor inside the cabin. That shot had evidently been a signal. Guns opened from all sides, filling the creek bottom with crashing echoes.

"Any other damn fool would a-knowned that wasn't a real owl hooting," he muttered.

Bullets hammered into the thick logs of the cabin walls. One found a crack high up and knocked a folded paper into the middle of the floor. Monk Vestal got up and shoved the barrel of his saddle gun through an opening between two logs where the adobe had fallen out. He lined his gun on the willows. When he caught a second wink of light down there, he took quick aim and pulled the trigger.

A hoarse scream told him his judgment and shooting were still prime. He grinned faintly, then grew grim. The dirty sneaking sons. They didn't know whether Sally Mitchell and the kids were out of the cabin or not. They didn't give a damn. They'd rode in to make a clean-up and women and children were no concern of theirs.

Along with the burning wrath inside Monk Vestal was also a nerve-humming feeling of exultance. Here was something bigger than he'd ever fought for before. Something that made a man forget the odds. Something to make a man hang and rattle as long as he could draw a breath. He prowled to the other side of the room and laid his gunbarrel across the window sill.

The charge came, as he'd expected. There was a wild yell, then hard-riding gunmen spurred out into the gathering darkness.

Monk Vestal emptied a saddle the first shot and with his second piled a hard-running horse on his head. The rider hit

the ground, bounced visibly, and lay still. But the drifter couldn't be in two places at once or see in all directions.

A rider made it to the window behind his back and emptied a six-shooter into the room. None of the bullets hit the drifter, but as he whirled to face this new threat, one entered an opening in some other part of the house and slammed into his left shoulder.

He hit the floor with a jar that rattled a tin plate on the kitchen table. But he wasn't out yet. He pushed himself to a sitting position with his one good hand, caught sight of the rider at the window, and let drive. He'd lost his saddle gun when he fell, but he knocked the man off his horse with his six-shooter.

He crawled behind the stove, while a new hail of lead laced the room. Carefully, he propped himself up in the corner and untied the black kerchief from around his neck. As if he had all the time in the world, he ripped off part of his shirt tail, wadded it against the bleeding wounds on both sides of his shoulder, and tied the kerchief around them to hold the wadding in place. Then he picked up his six-shooter and staggered to his feet.

For a moment, his senses reeled. He thought he was going down. Then the fog cleared from before his eyes and he was acutely aware of the silence of the guns.

Down by the spring he heard a hoarse domineering voice that he recognized. He listened closely. Walt Baker was cussing out his gun crew, ribbing them up to rush the cabin again.

The man's voice rose an anger. "He's crippled, I tell you!" he insisted. "Crippled or dead. I seen him knocked away from that winder and he went down. Go get him. What do you figure I'm paying you gun wages for?"

A surly voice objected. "What you're paying us is whiskey money," he charged. "And it's a waste of good likker to throw it into a belly shot all full of holes. You've cornered yourself a curly wolf, Walt Baker. He's done gunned down four men and is setting tight in yonder, waiting to knock over the balance. If you want him so bad, go git him yourself!"

"Clem's taken them words right out of my mouth," asserted a second voice.

"Go git him yourself. That bird's done convinced me."



THERE was a long silence and Monk Vestal could imagine those frog eyes of Walt Baker's glaring at his crew. The drifter grinned wolfishly. Those ducks lacked guts. They didn't have a purpose. They weren't fighting for a home. They weren't making a back-to-the-wall stand to protect a blue-eyed woman and four cotton-headed kids. They couldn't understand how tough a hand can get when he's finally discovered a real purpose in life. It might not last long, that purpose. But while it lasted, it put fight in a man that made him hard to shave.

Walt Baker's voice cut into his reflections, savage with disgust and fury. "All right, you yeller-bellied rabbits," he growled. "Just keep hunkered down here on your limber tails and watch me. I'll show you how to comb that curly wolf's hair!"

"We'll be watching," jeered another voice, "from right where we set. We're plenty willing to be showed. You just go right ahead."

Monk Vestal looked back over his shoulder to make sure he wouldn't be outlined against an open window. Then he turned and set himself, facing the door. He hung his broken arm inside the bosom of his shirt to keep it out of his way and cocked his six-shooter. He could hear the quick, spur-clanking steps of the squat Walt Baker coming up the slant. He wished the man would hurry. Seemed

like that fog was beginning to drift back in front of his eyes. He couldn't see so well now.

The fog got thicker and thicker. Walt Baker was on the flagstone floor of the gallery and sneaking toward a window before it cleared a little. Darkness had come now and when the drifter finally saw the man, he was only an indistinct shadow at the window.

The drifter's voice was thick and hoarse when he called out: "This is it, Baker!"

He swung up his gun. The fog had come back. Desperately quick, without any sort of aim, he emptied the six-shooter at the window. If there was any return fire, he couldn't see or hear it. He tried to look out the window, but the floor leaped up and slapped him a stunning blow in the face.

From some great distance, he heard the rattle of gunfire, the hammer of horse's hoofs and wild yells. Then the floor was spinning with him and there was a loud roaring coming closer and closer. . . .

The shock of cold water in his face brought Monk Vestal out of it with a start. He sat up, blinking, to find himself unclothed and in bed. Across the room from him Hamp—or Flim—stood back against a second bed with a water dipper in his hand and a frightened look on his round face.

His brother stood at the foot of the bed and said accusingly: "You hadn't oughta done that!"

The one with the dipper started easing along the bed toward the door, ready to bolt. "Well, Mama said we couldn't eat

HIT HITLER AND HIROHITO

HARDER—HARDER—HARDER!

BUY WAR BONDS



it till he woke up," he said defensively. His chin quivered.

Monk Vestal wiped the water out of his face and grinned. "Eat what?" he questioned.

Eagerness came back into the eyes of both kids. "That there striped watermelon," said the one with the dipper.

"We looked at the wrong curl," said the other. "We went back and found the right one and it was dead. So we pulled the melon."

"And then we come and told Mama," said the first, "and she sent Hop and Shad to pack it in."

"She was pretty mad," said the dipper holder, "but she's feeling so good this morning, she didn't bust our tails."

Monk Vestal laughed outright, then winced at the jar in his left shoulder. He felt of it. An expertly arranged bandage covered the wound. His shoulder felt numb and dead; there was little pain. Outside the sun shone brightly. A woman's footsteps entered the kitchen door from the outside and hurried toward the room.

"Hamp! Flim! You little scamps come out of there. What have you been up to now!"



SALLY MITCHELL appeared in the doorway, her blue eyes bright and shining. Her brown hair curled around a smooth face and Monk Vestal noted that she was wearing one of the two pretty dresses he'd seen hanging behind the curtain the evening before. It was the blue one, not the white with blue ribbons.

The drifter spoke up in time to save the frightened twins. "We've just been talking," he said. "What's the name of the one with the mole on him?"

Before she could answer, Hop came into the room, staggering under the load of the striped watermelon he carried across one shoulder. Shad followed him, wearing a gunbelt from which sagged two black-butted six-shooters.

"Shad," commanded Sally Mitchell. "You go take off those two guns!"

Shad's jaw set stubbornly. "I needed these guns last night, Ma, and I'm likely

to need 'em agin. I mean when me'n Ringer and Hop opened up on what this here gent left of Baker's tough hands, they didn't hang around to argue. They quit the country, raking hoss hair ever' jump. We'd a-got Baker, too, if this Vestal duck hadn't beat us to him!

"Shad's braggy," Hop spoke up confidentially. "He likes to tell it scary." He put the melon down on the floor. "You aiming to stay on with us, Mister? Somebody shot that old mortgage r'lease out of the cracks of the house last night, so we still got that last hog money and Ringer says we can get the rest of our money we didn't owe Baker from his estate. He claimed he'd see to it. We could maybe start us a little cow spread back in the brush here."

"We pestered Mama all morning," Shad put in, "till she says she could do with a man like you around!"

"Shad!" exclaimed Sally Mitchell in panic.

Monk Vestal started and looked at the boys' mother. Sally Mitchell's clear blue eyes met his, then dropped. She turned quickly and went out of the room, but not before the drifter had caught sight of a warm flush mounting her cheeks.

The boys were watching him expectantly. He felt the red crawling up his own neck. He caught sight of Hamp and Flim coming through the front door, approaching the melon with high eagerness in their faces. One packed a murderous butcher knife and both had the light of purpose in their eyes.

Monk Vestal swallowed and grinned. What the hell? Here was a hand-picked family. Something for a man to protect and thus justify his existence. He looked up at Hop and Shad.

"I'll stay on a spell," he promised. "Then some night when the moon's right, me'n your mama'll talk it over about staying on for good."

Hop looked at Shad. Shad handed it back with a wink. "The moon," Hop said with extreme gravity, "will rise new tonight!"

Monk Vestal sucked in a quick breath. Inside him was a new and strange warmth. "Let's cut that watermelon," he said quickly.

DRIVE ON, TEXICANS!

Jim's guns had been ready.
He cut loose!



By JACK BLOODHART

That herd of three thousand bawling longhorns was salvation to the four war-wrecked Texas ranchers, and neither tribute-demanding redskins nor hijacking trail pirates were going to stop their desperate drive to Fort Scott!

"TROUBLE comin', Jim." Jim Bailey mopped the salty sweat and trail dust from his face with a swipe of his bandana and nodded soberly. Pulling his horse to a halt, he stuffed the bandana back into a pocket and loosened the gun in the holster at his hip. Then he twisted in the saddle and looked back at the 3,000 longhorns stretched out behind him, an undulating sea of horns upon which rode the

hopes—even the lives—of four desperate, war-ravaged Texas ranchers.

"Go back an' tell 'em to stop the herd," he said quietly.

Bearpaw Jones nodded, eyes bright above his crooked nose and scraggly mustache. "What yuh aimin' on doin', Jim?"

"Fight, if they want it. I ain't payin'."

Bearpaw turned his horse around and rode back with Jim's orders to the crew. A bitter cast pulling the corners of his mouth down tight, Jim Bailey stared straight at the six mounted Indians riding toward him. He knew who they were—representatives of the Five Civilized Nations, whose headquarters his herd of Texas longhorns was approaching. They wanted 10 cents a head for every one of those longhorns passing through Five Nations' territory.

The herd halted, Bearpaw came back to Jim's side, accompanied this time by Bob Flannery, one of Ike Keenan's crew.

The Indians had come within speaking distance now and stopped. The leader, whose appearance and demeanor was that of a chief, raised his arm in a gesture of peace and said, "How."

Jim grunted, "How," and waited for the Indian to continue.

Neither party made a move to dismount.

It had been too easy, Jim thought. From the east quarter of Texas, where the herd had been rounded up, he brought it safely across the Red River into Choctaw country and up the Kiamichi Valley, heading toward Baxter Springs and the railroad at Sedalia—from where the longhorns would go to Chicago by rail. And it had come this far—to the territory of the Five Nations—without a hitch. Now . . .

"White man's cattle hurt Five Nations land," the Indian leader said in good English. "Must pay. Ten cents each head. Otherwise, may not pass."

"You kin go plumb to —" Bearpaw spluttered, shut off by a movement of Jim's hand.

"An' if I can't pay it?" Jim asked quietly.

"Cattle not pass. Turn back."

Jim flushed, then shook his head slowly. "I won't pay it, savvy? An' I won't be stopped!" He was aware, as they all

were, that the Indians' demands were perfectly legal. But Texans were accustomed to fighting Indians, not making financial deals with them. Jim Bailey's Texas ranch was up as he struggled to remain calm.

"We'll shoot our way through these flea-bit redskins," Bob Flannery growled. "If they think they kin stop—"

"There's more of 'em than this," Jim interrupted. He turned to the leader, shaking his head. "No pay," he repeated.

The Indian nodded. "Then go back. Otherwise, big trouble." With that he signaled his followers and the six wheeled around and rode off, erect in their saddles.

Scowling, the three Texans watched them go.

"Big trouble!" Bearpaw snorted. "We'll give 'em big trouble. Damned robbin' redskins! What yuh gonna do, Jim?"

Jim swung out of his saddle, the others following suit, and built a cigarette before answering. "I'm takin' this herd to Sedalia," he said quietly. Jim was a tall, bronzed man, younger than he looked, eyes deep set and steady. Four years of service in the Army of the Confederacy had left their mark on him—and the run-down, half-destroyed ranch-house he had returned to after Appomattox had deepened and widened that mark.

"More visitors," Bob Flannery said suddenly. "White men this time."

They looked in the direction he pointed, saw two men riding toward them, apparently having come out of the heavy grove to their left. Jim dropped the cigarette and ground it out, suddenly wary.

The two riders stopped and dismounted. "Howdy," one of them said. "Come up from Texas?"

Jim nodded. "That's right."

"Parker's my name," the other said. He nodded in the direction the Indians had vanished. "Have trouble with 'em?"

"Not yet."

"You will," Parker said. "The law's on their side. You pay 'em or else."

"I don't pay 'em."

Parker shrugged. "Some do an' some don't. Them that don't usually regret it." He paused, squinting toward the stalled herd of longhorns. "How many head you got?"

"What's on your mind, friend?"



PARKER gave his companion—who appeared more of a bodyguard than a partner—a sidewise glance. He had not bothered to introduce him, and the partner hadn't spoken. Now he merely shifted his body as if to be ready for any eventuality.

"Why," Parker said, "I might be willing to make you an offer."

The three Texans regarded him unsmilingly. Parker was a thin, hawk-faced man, dressed in black. He did not look like a cattle buyer, but for a moment Jim's spirits soared. A sale here would solve many problems.

"How much?" he asked Parker.

"Well, you're in a spot. You can't move through the Five Nations without payin' the Injuns. I figger you ain't willin' to take them cows back to Texas. I'm doin' you a favor."

"Not yet, you're not. How much?"

"Three dollars a head."

Bearpaw Jones and Bob Flannery cursed simultaneously and took half a step forward as if to ram Parker's offer back down his throat.

Jim Bailey looked stunned, then flushed with anger. "Three dollars! Why, you four-flushin' tinhorn, the sweat an' blood that went into gatherin' that herd is worth more'n that!"

His own angry words opened the floodgates of Jim Bailey's memory. In the space of moments, the whole of the past few months crowded through his mind in short, kaleidoscopic scenes. He remembered his home-coming, after four years of war—hardly able to believe what his eyes told him as he rode into the ranchyard of the once-proud Running W. It was little more than a poverty-spread of the worst sort; buildings run down, slatternly looking, weeds growing everywhere, the stout pole corral sagging drunkenly, and the house a miserable spectacle of want.

But that was only part of it. His mother, Lucy, he hardly knew, so old and careworn had she grown. His father, Fighting Mike Bailey, who had carved this ranch from the wilderness and held it against

hell and high water, did not know his son. And only with difficulty could Jim bring himself to believe that this gaunt, broken-spirited old man, drained of all hope, was his father. All Fighting Mike Bailey did now was to sit on the rickety porch, staring out over the range, waiting to die.

Telling these two broken people that his brothers, their other two sons, Des and Johnny, would never come back, but lay forever in an alien soil miles from Texas, was the hardest job Jim Bailey ever did.

Gone was the Running W horse stock, taken for the Army; gone the cultivating tools, gone the Negroes, of which the Running W had three. Of money, except Confederate, there was none. Out of twenty cowboys on the Running W, only one remained to greet Jim Bailey—old Bearpaw Jones, who had been with Fighting Mike since the very beginning. And from Bearpaw Jim learned of the blight that had fallen on Texas: market for cattle gone, destroyed by the war; herds running wild and so valueless that rounding up and branding was a waste of time. Texas financially prostrate, writhing in the throes of Reconstruction.

He remembered the one gleam of hope: vast herds of longhorns, true Texas cattle, bred to fit the conditions of Texas. These longhorns were all that Texas—and Jim Bailey and his neighbors—had. And their only market lay in the north—which meant trail drive.

He remembered calling together three other ranchers in the vicinity: Ike Keenan, Neil Kennedy and Bill Ellsworth—who had taken a herd to the Confederate Army during the war had only a handful of Confederate money to show for it now. He remembered showing them that the longhorns were their last hope—and remembered the back-breaking, soul-searing weeks of roundup, buoyed by the knowledge that if they went down in the end, they'd go down fighting.

That herd stood at Jim's back now—the herd that meant salvation to four war-wrecked ranches, the herd that was Jim Bailey's answer to forces that had all but wrecked his home, his family and his friends. . . .

And Parker had offered him three dollars a head!

"You can go to hell, Parker. I'll see 'em rot first!"

Parker's thin smile lay ugly on his face. "They'll rot, Texican. My advice to you is to take your damned cows an' get out, an' keep out of decent men's country!"

Jim hit him, a solid punch to the chin that stretched Parker flat. His bodyguard started to move, stopped when Bearpaw and Bob Flannery jerked their guns and covered him. On the ground, Parker pulled a derringer from his sleeve, but before he could use it, Jim kicked it from his hand, perked him to his feet and hit him again.

"Now get out of my sight," he said tightly, holding back the fury and heart-break and months of toil that boiled up to the surface, threatening to drive him to kill. "An' if I see you again, I'll tear you apart with my bare hands."

Parker picked himself up and backed away, his face black with anger. "I'll remember this, Texican," he snarled through tight lips. "An' if you move this herd around the Nations, I'll pick up what the Jayhawkers leave for it!"

Reaching their horses, Parker and his frustrated bodyguard mounted and galloped away, disappeared into the grove out of which they had appeared. When they had gone, the three Texans looked at each other, and when he built a cigarette, Jim Bailey's hands shook.

"A sweet punch," Bob Flannery said. "He had it comin', the cheap coyote." He looked at Jim and Bearpaw. "What'd he mean—Jayhawkers?"

Bearpaw cursed feelingly. "Gangs from Kansas and Missouri, stoppin' all herds tryin' to cross them states. Salty hombres—done some killin' already."

"Looks like we're stopped," Flannery commented.

"Stopped, hell!" Jim snapped. "I ain't started yet! Bearpaw, we're swingin' east—into Arkansas. We'll go north right along the Arkansas line to Missouri. Savvy?"

Bearpaw nodded. "Right." He squinted skyward. "Four hours daylight yet. Might's well get goin'. Bob, ride up an' head off Doughbelly and tell him to swing that chuck-wagon east—and don't fergit Stubby an' the remuda. We'll need them hawses."

Bob Flannery saluted and galloped off to find the cook, Doughbelly, and his chuck-wagon.

Jim turned to Bearpaw. "Tell the boys," he said. "If any of 'em want to quit, let 'em go."

"Quit?" Bearpaw snorted. "They're Texans—not a lot of slobber-jawed Jayhawkers. We'll get these critters tuh Sedalia or damn well know the reason why!"



TWO days later Jim Bailey's ten-man crew pushed the last of 3,000 bawling longhorns across the Arkansas line. They had skirted the Five Nations, avoided paying tribute to the Nations' Indians. And now, trail-worn, hoarse from constant singing to the cattle, choked with never-ending dust, they turned north on what they hoped was the final leg of the grueling drive.

Bone-weary, the crew was nevertheless optimistic. Recruited from the three ranchers whose brands, with Bailey's, made up this longhorn herd, they were tough and loyal. Told about Parker's threats, they laughed them off. Their guns rode loose in their holsters, ready for use.

Bearpaw Jones did not share the crew's optimism. "I kin smell trouble," he told Jim Bailey privately. "I been smellin' it for thirty years, an' I ain't been wrong yet. I smell it now."

To satisfy Bearpaw, Jim sent Bob Flannery scouting ahead of the herd as they pushed north along the Arkansas line toward Missouri. On the third day after crossing in Arkansas, Jim and Bearpaw rode point together.

"We're nearin' Baxter Springs," Jim told the grizzled puncher, "an' I ain't seen any of that trouble you been sniffin'."

"Hombres like Parker don't talk just tuh thei'selves run off at the mouth," Bearpaw retorted.

They rode a dusty mile in silence. Bearpaw, who had been squinting along the trail ahead, pulled up suddenly.

"Rider comin'," he said. "Fast. Looks like Flannery. It's that trouble I been afearin'."

"Cheerful cus, ain't yuh?" Jim muttered, pulling his mount beside Bearpaw.

Flannery, catching sight of the pair, turned in their direction, and five minutes later reached them.

"Might's well stop them cows right here," he said without preamble.

Jim Bailey's eyes hardened. "What's up? If it's them damn' Jayhawkers—"

Flannery mopped his streaming face. "You said it," Flannery was emphatic. "There's half a dozen herds damned up between here'n Baxter Springs, afeared to move. Jayhawkers've already salted down three men an' rustled mighty near five hundred head of Texas beef!"

Jim Bailey swore. "Texas men lettin' a lot of blasted sod-busters stop 'em?"

Flannery nodded. "It ain't right, but it's the truth."

"All right, to hell with Baxter Springs. We'll go around 'em—"

"Hold on a minute, Jim," Bearpaw interrupted. "You can't go shovin' these critters around the country fer the rest of yore life. Yuh'll wear 'em down tuh hide an' tallow."

Jim swung on him. "Dammit, Bearpaw, four Texas ranchers are standin' on the brink of ruin, an' this herd'll save 'em! I'm takin' it to Sedalia!"

"First," Bearpaw drawled, "why don't yuh find a buyer?"

"Yeah," Jim said heavily, "that's a great idee. Bob, go scout around under them bushes. Find me a buyer."

"You'll likely find one in Fort Scott," Bearpaw said, unabashed.

For a moment Jim considered a hot retort. Then he said, "Yeah, Bearpaw, I wouldn't be surprised. Sorry fer bein' so hot-headed. All right, I'm headin' for Fort Scott. Bearpaw, you're in charge. Keep the herd here. I'll be back in three days."

"Look up a feller name of Simon Keyne when yuh get tuh Fort Scott," Bearpaw said. "I've heered he's a square dealer."



RED-EYED, tired and hungry, Jim Bailey rode into Fort Scott in mid-afternoon of the second day after leaving his herd. Almost the first thing he saw was a sign jutting from the second floor of a weather-beaten building reading: "Simon Keyne, Cattle Buyer."

Racking his horse in front of the build-

ing, Jim tramped wearily up the steps to the second floor and opened the door.

A portly, well-dressed man with a black cigar jutting from his mouth looked up from a desk as Jim entered. At first glance Jim liked him.

"Howdy," he said in a deep voice, "what can I do for you?"

"You Simon Keyne? My name's Jim Bailey, from Texas. I've got three thousand head of longhorns I want to sell."

Keyne sat up straight, eyes widening. "And that's something I want to buy, cowboy!" His face sobered. "Where is this herd?"

"South o' Baxter Springs a piece."

"Oh!" Keyne subsided. "Well, Texican, if you can get it here, I'll buy it. Heard about the Jayhawkers?"

"That's why my herd ain't here now. How much you offerin'?"

"Twelve dollars."

"I'll take eighteen."

"I don't doubt it, friend. Fourteen."

"Fifteen an' you've bought some beef."

Keyne shrugged. "Fifteen it is, Texican. Delivered to me at Fort Scott."

"I'll get 'em here," Jim promised.

Keyne stood up, put out his hand. "You look like you might, at that. Let me buy you a drink on it."

"No, thanks. Just tell me where I can get a bed for a few hours."

"Try the Palace," Keyne said. "About the best in Fort Scott—which isn't sayin' much."

The Palace was good enough and two minutes after he hit the bed in his room Jim was asleep. He awoke at dawn, ravenously hungry.

With a breakfast of steak, eggs and fried potatoes, washed down with black coffee, under his belt, Jim got his horse from the public livery and started back south toward his herd. Keyne's offer of fifteen dollars a head for his longhorns was better than Jim had hoped to get. He grinned now as he thought how close he'd been to jumping at the cattle buyer's first offer of twelve.

Forty-five thousand dollars in real money would go a long way toward putting the Running W and the other three Texas ranches on a firm footing again.

Noon of the second day after leaving Fort Scott, Jim reached his herd once

more. He had ridden around Baxter Springs and the damned-up herd that held up his own, and once had spotted a group of men riding fast in a westerly direction. They had not seen him, and were soon lost to sight, but Jim remembered the Jayhawkers and thereafter rode with his gun and rifle ready to use.

He found Bearpaw seated on his horse in almost exactly the same spot he had left him three days ago.

"Grewed to that spot, Bearpaw?" he asked after a perfunctory greeting.

Bearpaw grunted. "You look happy. Make a deal?"

"Yeah. Yore friend Simon Keyne offered fifteen dollars a head. I took it."

"I should think yuh would. Where do we make delivery?"

"Fort Scott. And we start right now. I figure on swingin' east a piece, then north. We'll go around Baxter Springs."

"That's real sensible. I thought mebbe we was gonna climb over the backs of them critters around Baxter Springs."

Jim grinned. "The years ain't mellowed you none, you old goat. I'll ride drag a ways. Let's go."

Half an hour later the herd was on the move. Men, horses and cattle, rested during Jim's absence, were rarin' to go. Jim spread the word among the punchers concerning the deal he'd made with Keyne. The effect was like a long swallow of Forty Rod after a dusty ride. Come hell or high water, they'd get this herd to Fort Scott!

The hell came sooner than even Bearpaw might have expected. Riding drag, Jim was too far away to do anything when he saw a group of nearly twenty riders come out of a wooded ravine near the head of the moving herd. Above the bawling of the cattle Jim could hear nothing. Then a shot rang out. Jim put spurs to his horse.

Already the herd had begun to mill. The shot had spooked them. Then a volley rang out and the longhorns began to stampede in earnest. Cursing, Jim roared toward the group of mounted Jayhawkers. Dimly, he heard Bearpaw shouting, but could not see him. Then he reached the band of marauding Jayhawkers—and looked into the sneering face of the "buyer"—Parker.

Jim took in the scene at a glance: one of his men, Al Williams, lay sprawled face down on the ground, the victim of the first shot Jim had heard. Half the Jayhawker band had gone after the cattle. The rest were awaiting him. The frightened, bawling cattle streamed past them now in a wild rout, making speech impossible. Fury tore at Jim Bailey.

"Damn you, you slab-sided hog—" Jim shouted as he went for his gun. Someone he hadn't even seen struck at him from behind, knocking the half-drawn gun from his hand. Four of the Jayhawkers rushed up then, leaped on Jim and pulled him from his horse. He went down in a wild tangle of arms and legs, struggled to his feet and struck out blindly as the four Jayhawkers set on him with fists flailing.

Cursing and half blinded by fury, Jim struck out madly at his attackers, and got in two or three solid punches before one of them laid a gun barrel on the side of his head. He went down, consciousness dimming. . . .



"COME on, come on, wake up. This ain't no time for sleepin'." Jim Bailey groaned and opened his eyes. He looked up into Bearpaw's bewhiskered face.

"This must be hell," Jim muttered thickly. "You ain't no angel."

"Dammit, boy, I'm sorry I couldn't help you agin them murderin' coyotes—" Bearpaw slopped water from his hat into Jim's face, then lifted his head and gave him a drink. Jim sat up straight, took his head in his hands. "How're the rest of the boys? An' the cattle?"

"Al's dead," Bearpaw said. "Dirty sons killed him. Rest of the boys is okay—stayed with the herd an' drove off them Jayhawkers. Killed three of 'em, by dam!"

Jim looked up sharply. "Parker?"

"Wa'n't among the dead, worse luck. The cattle're safe—all but about two hundred head."

Jim got slowly to his feet. "Get the boys in here," he said. "I want tuh talk to 'em." He rubbed his head tenderly. "I'm glad Parker's still kickin'. That little skunk is going to hear from me."

His crew around him, Jim said, "I ain't got the words to thank you boys for stickin' with the herd. But you won't regret it." He paused, went on quietly, "Maybe we've seen the last of those skunks, maybe not. But this herd is goin' to Fort Scott—"

"Yo're damn' right it's goin' to Fort Scott!" one of the crew interrupted, "an' we're goin' with it! That right, boys?"

They answered in unison, "Right!"

Jim Bailey grinned at them. "Which saves me the trouble of askin'. We'll move at night, hole up by day. It'll be tougher, but I think it's the best idea. An' we start tonight!"

With supper under their belts, the crew waited for full darkness, then grimly watchful, began to push the herd through the scanty timberland of southeastern Kansas toward Fort Scott.

Not even the nights on the battlefield, when he had lain for seemingly endless hours listening to the crack of Federal rifles and the boom of Federal artillery, seemed any longer than this night. From the moment darkness came, and the herd began to move unwillingly forward, Jim Bailey kept ceaseless vigil, constantly circling the moving cattle as he contacted each man in turn.

Rifle at the ready, he fought weariness that threatened to slug him out of the saddle; peered into the surrounding darkness until his eyes ached fiercely. He could hardly believe it when dawn finally streaked the eastern sky and the night had passed without incident. He had not slept since leaving Fort Scott.

Calling Bearpaw, Jim gave orders for guarding and concealing the herd during the day, and dropped off his saddle. In five minutes he was asleep.

It was late afternoon before Jim awoke, and gathering storm cloud and a rising wind gave promise of trouble. Bearpaw objected to moving the herd that night.

"We'll move on," Jim said. "Them Jayhawkers, if they're around, won't be expectin' a move tonight."

"Bearpaw shook his head gloomily. "Yo're the boss, but I don't like it."

Lightning split the sky and thunder rumbled as darkness fell and the crew, keyed to fiddle-string tautness, began to move the skittery herd ahead. Every man

of them secretly expected an attack under cover of darkness and rain.

Riding point, Jim Bailey cursed the lightning and thunder and the rain that began to fall an hour after the herd had begun to move. His slicker he left in the roll behind his saddle: it interfered with a man's gunplay.

Peering through the wet, thick darkness, Jim went stiff at every shadow, saw armed men behind every bush and grove. He caught snatches of harsh, unmelodious singing from the men as they prodded the boogery cattle on.

Another hour passed without alarm. The rain, while not slacking, had not increased. Thunder rolled up and down the valley and brought cold sweat on Jim as he thought of its effect on the spooky herd.

Bearpaw came over to his side, dripping wet and full of foreboding. "I don't like it, Jim. I kin smell—"

"Nothin's happened yet," Jim broke in roughly, "an' maybe it won't. Why don't you try smellin' somethin' else for a change?"

Bearpaw peered ahead into the darkness. "Just seen a heavy grove off to the left when that lightnin' flared up," he said. "Keep an' eye on places like that, Jim."



JIM nodded and Bearpaw drifted away. Another lightning flash showed Jim the grove Bearpaw had warned against. It could conceal a small army if necessary. Jim's hands closed around the rifle in front of him.

As the grove came nearer, Jim twisted in the saddle, trying to catch sight of the rest of the men. He saw one or two shadowy shapes, but could not even be sure they were riders.

Jim tucked his rifle under his left arm, ready to fire, and pulled his six-gun. Where in hell was Bearpaw, and the rest of the crew? Damn them, didn't they know.

He swore softly and shook his head. He had been so sure nothing would happen tonight.

And nothing had happened—yet! He was but a few yards from the grove now,

and off to his right the leaders of the big herd plodded protestingly through the mud and rain. Jim Bailey's eyes never left the dark blotch that marked the grove Bearpaw had pointed out, and sweat mingled with the rain running down his grimlipped face.

It came with startling suddenness. He was abreast of the grove, sitting stiff as a ramrod in the saddle and gripping both his guns hard, when a wild shout rang out above the storm and a band of perhaps fifteen men boiled out of the grove.

Jim hardly needed to move his guns—they had been trained on the grove since he had seen it. Now he worked the triggers, poured a withering fire into the raiders. He then twisted in the saddle to shout to his men—and saw another band of riders moving up fast behind him!

He was trapped between them! The Jayhawkers had split in two. These things went through Jim's mind in a flash, then he again triggered swiftly at the gang, hardly conscious of the scared bellowing of the cattle.

Suddenly a furious burst of gunfire boomed out from the riders behind him—and Bearpaw's voice lifted in a warwhoop. These were his own men! Bearpaw had gathered them all in for this moment!

The Jayhawkers shouted and milled in confusion, not having expected this attack in force. The Texans should have been scattered around the herd.

Yelling, Jim's men swept past him, guns blazing. It seemed that the thunder and lightning had suddenly increased to add its awesome voice to the battle raging in the rain. Above it sounded the bawling of the cattle.

A gun exploded almost in Jim's face, the bullet whistling past his ear. In the flash of the gun he saw the man who fired it—Parker!

With a roar of anger Jim launched himself out of the saddle, grabbed Parker and dragged him to the sodden ground. For a moment they thrashed wildly in the mud and water. Then Jim got clear and leapt to his feet. He saw the gun still in Parker's hand, kicked it out. Parker bellowed in pain, lurched to his feet. Jim bore in, smashed him flat with a terrific right-hand punch.

Parker got up and came again with fists

flailing, but Jim stood ready. He avoided Parker's angry blows, countered with a left to Parker's belly that doubled him up and a right that caught Parker on the chin and flattened him.

The Jayhawker came up with a knife in his hand. Snarling curses, he rushed at Jim, the knife winking evilly in the lightning flashes. Jim jumped to one side, felt the knife slide across his arm, and then leapt on Parker as the "buyer" slipped on the wet earth. Parker went down—and screamed suddenly, a high-pitched, animal-like scream that died in a gurgle as the Jayhawker went limp.

Dazed, Jim stood up slowly. His arm throbbed and he knew Parker's knife had drawn blood. He bent down now and rolled the man over. The knife was buried in Parker's chest. He had fallen on it and died by his own weapon.

Jim mopped his face shakily. He had hardly been aware of the gunfire between his own men and the rest of the Jayhawkers, but realized now that it had stopped. The herd was gone, too.

"Jim! Jim, where in hell are yuh?" Bearpaw's raspy voice called out.

Jim hailed him, and a moment later his men rode into view. He counted quickly. They were all here.

"Five of them skunks won't ride no more," Bearpaw said grimly. "The rest is ridin' real hard. I doubt if they'll be able tuh stop this side of Canady."

"Six," Jim corrected, pointing at the limp figure of Parker.

"We had a little trouble," Jim said. "He pulled a knife an' fell on it."

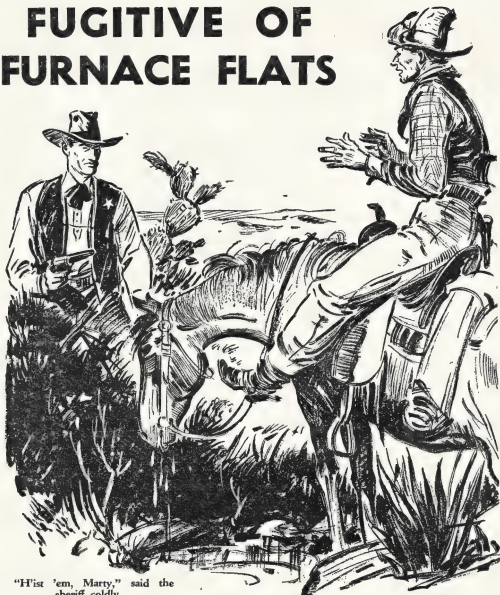
"We better git after them cows," Bob Flannery said.

"Let 'em run," Bearpaw growled. "They'll get tuckered soon enough. We'll get 'em in the morning. I've had a bellyful of night ridin'."

Jim agreed quickly. He looked around at his men, all of them dripping wet, clothes shapeless, and eyes red with weariness. "With Parker gone," Jim said, "I doubt if that gang'll operate again. The way to Fort Scott is clear—an' there'll be an extra hundred dollars for each one of you when we get there. If you boys'd quit—"

"Hell!" Bearpaw snorted. "Texans don't never quit!"

FUGITIVE OF FURNACE FLATS



"H'ist 'em, Marty," said the sheriff coldly.

By JIM KJELGAARD

The murderer's noose waited for young Marty in the crooked town of Coyote. . . . Yet on that sun-baked desert, he missed his last chance for freedom—for there are certain things that even a gallows-doomed cowpuncher can't do. . . .

THE brim on Marty's high-crowned felt hat was limp and broken, and to keep it from falling over his eyes he had pinned it to the crown with a thorn. His checked shirt and blue jeans were sun-faded to a listless, dirty white, and his toes showed through ragged holes in his high-heeled boots.

The clothes were adequate, he had worn worse. But he did feel somewhat un-

dressed because the holster at his side was empty. The smooth-handled Colt he had carried there for the past ten years had been lost three days before on his wild flight from Coyote.

Marty dismounted beside a cactus on top of a sand hill, and the little mouse-colored bronco that he had been riding pawed the sand with a front hoof. Marty's gray eyes clouded. Bronco wore a rope bridle and a bit from which Marty had scraped every bit of rust. His saddle was a gaunt, skeleton affair with half the leather worn away and one stirrup fastened precariously with wire, and such a state of affairs was hardly right.

It was all right for a man to be poor and to show his poverty. But at all times his horse should be fittingly caparisoned. Marty stroked Bronco's soft muzzle, and the horse's brown eyes lit with pleasure. Marty's aching heart eased a little. He loved Bronco. And Bronco seemed to love him enough so that he just didn't give a hoot what kind of saddle and bridle he wore.

"We got this far," Marty crooned softly. "We got this far, Bronco, an' we'll go farther."

Bronco nickered, and Marty guessed from that that he understood perfectly. If the breaks continued in their favor they would get as far as they had to go. Or anyway, as far as Marty had to go—which was the Mexican border. Back in Coyote only a hangman's rope awaited him.

Still, what else was a man to do? It was perfectly all right to lose your saddle, bridle, money, and even clothes in a poker game—and you didn't cry when you lost fairly. But when you palmed the deck of cards after you lost everything, and found them marked, you naturally went back and called gambler Antonio Ferrere about it, didn't you?

When Ferrere drew a gun Marty had proven that the legend of the invincible Antonio was, after all, only a legend. There was one faster man, and his name was Marty Sollers. So everything was fine—except for Sheriff Joe Kales.

Marty, not stopping to recover his worldly possessions, had ridden out of Coyote on Bronco. A lackadaisical posse had mustered and chased him about ten

miles. But the posse hadn't loved Antonio Ferrere either. Besides they had not been too serious about catching anyone able to beat Antonio to the draw. But it was still two days ride to the border—and there was still Sheriff Joe Kales.

Marty had known him from ten years back. Not intimately, he never had liked to get intimate with any sheriff. But if you rode within fifty miles of Coyote you knew Joe Kales. It was whispered that he was in league with the gamblers, and got his cut of their take. But that was only whispered because, even if it was so, nobody would dare say it out loud.

So a man wouldn't really know. What a man would know, beyond any shadow of doubt, was that Kales could handle a gun faster and better than anyone he had yet run up against. He was the law in Coyote, and it was his spoken boast that never had anyone got away with anything that Kales didn't want them to.

Marty guessed it was his good luck that Kales had been away from Coyote the night Antonio Ferrere met so sudden and altogether fitting a demise.

In this land of horsemen, to hear about Kales was also to hear about his horses. Kentucky thoroughbreds they were, slim-legged, high-stepping beauties that could outrun the wind. Such a horse could give Bronco a half-mile handicap and catch him at the end of a mile. But Marty patted Bronco's neck affectionately. Horses like that were for rich sheriffs. Bronco was a cowboy's horse, and Marty had ridden either Bronco or a horse like him for the past twenty years, since he was nine.

Marty uncorked his canteen and poured the last few drops of water it contained into the palm of his hand. He held his outstretched hand before Bronco's muzzle, and the horse licked up the water. He nickered appreciatively, as though to tell Marty what a fine drink it had been. Marty knew that he lied. Bronco had had his last full-sized drink nearly eighteen hours ago, back at Coyote Springs. And the way the sun was pouring it on today, his tongue and throat probably felt exactly the way Marty's did.

He wasn't suffering unduly, or dying with thirst. Bronco was tough like Marty—brought up to do without that which he could not get. He could go another eight-

een hours, or longer if necessary, without water. But it was not necessary. Silver Springs was only an hour's ride. After that it was ten hours to Duck Springs, and ten more to Crow Wallow. Then the border, and once across that Bronco could roll in as much water as he liked for as long as he liked.

Marty mounted, and let Bronco pick the trail as he rode slowly on towards Silver Springs. The desert all looked alike, and except for the bleached skeleton of a horse there or a wagon wheel here there was hardly any visible trail. Yet Marty knew that Bronco was going right. There seemed to be just one way an animal would go through this burning waste, and that way led straight to water. Maybe they followed the scent of the animals that had gone this way before. Any way, forty five minutes later Marty saw the straggling shrubbery about Silver Springs.

Bronco nickered happily and broke into a little trot. Marty ducked his head to avoid the thorny branches of the few trees about Silver Springs, and let Bronco bury his muzzle in the cool water. Then—

"Well, well, well! If it ain't my old pal, Silver Sollers!" a cold voice said. "H'ist 'em, Marty."

Marty looked from the saddle straight into Joe Kales' leveled gun.



BRONCO raised his head and water dripped back into the spring as he blew through his nostrils at this stranger. Marty raised his hands and hunched his right hip around so Joe Kales could see his empty holster. He never should have run, he guessed. You just couldn't run away from Joe Kales. Even when you left him far behind he sprang out of the desert straight at you.

Now Marty would go back to Coyote to be hanged, and what would become of Bronco? They would shoot him probably, or else give him to some cowpoke who thought the spurs on his boots were for the sole purpose of cutting a horse in two. Marty gulped.

"You scared?" Joe Kales drawled.

"Not of you!" Marty flared. "Am I goin' to sit here pointin' at the sky all night?"

Joe Kales shrugged and slid his gun back into its holster. Deliberately he turned his back on Marty and started towards a rock butte. Marty stifled the rage and indignation that leaped within him. Just because he had been out-foxed by Joe Kales the man needn't think he had caught a tame steer that couldn't get away from him now.

But, Marty gulped again, that's just about what he had caught. Even if Marty ran he had to run by Duck Springs and Crow Hollow, and the horse Joe Kales had hidden behind that butte could catch him before he went five miles. Two minutes later Joe Kales came back. The breath caught in Marty's throat and for the moment he forgot his own plight and everything else except the horse the sheriff led.

It was a beautiful thing, a horseman's dream. Coal black except for a white star in the center of its forehead and one white stocking, the horse had the slim body, arched neck, and long straight legs of a thoroughbred. And, as Sheriff Joe Kales led it to the spring, an incongruous, long-eared, sleepy-eyed little burro came from behind the butte and followed it.

Bronco backed away from the water and stared belligerently as the black horse bent its head to drink. Joe Kales stood by its side, his hand on a rope attached to the black's halter. Now that he was definitely the boss, with his prey in a trap from which there was no escape, he seemed to melt down and become human again.

Kales did not relax, or offer any sign of pity or sympathy. But they were going to be together in the desert for awhile, and they might as well be as pleasant as possible.

"I've been camped here since yesterday noon," Joe Kales said. "I knew you had to come this way."

"How—how did you get here?"

Joe Kales chuckled. "You gents always forget something, don't you? I guess you forgot there's telephones hereabouts now. I was at the C-Bar when Jose Veloz telephoned that you had killed Ferrere, and that you were heading for the border. I slung a couple of cans on the burro, loaded them with water, and came across Furnace Flats."

Marty blinked. Only Joe Kales would think of something like that, riding a horse across Furnace Flats where no horse was supposed to be able to go, and packing water on a burro so a horse could cross that waterless hell. It was a smart enough trick.

Marty looked at the lowering sun, and smelled the good smell of night coming down on the desert. He looked at Joe Kales' black horse, a horse from which Bronco could not hope to run away, and fought back the poignant grief that rose within him. It was going to be hard to leave all this, and especially hard to leave it for shooting a skunk like Antonio Ferrere.

"Got a cigarette?" Marty asked.

Joe Kales drew the makings out of his vest pocket, and tossed them over. Marty rolled a cigarette, licked it shut, put it in his mouth and lit it. He inhaled long puffs, his first in three days, and sighed. It was marvelous, how much better a man could feel after a smoke.

Marty stripped the saddle and bridle from bronco, rubbed him down with a coarse cloth, and turned him loose. Bronco nickered, and trotted away to roll in the sand. He went over once, waving all four legs in the air, and rolled back again. Then he got up and ran into the darkness. Marty heard him grazing on the grass about the spring, and threw his saddle down. He spread his saddle blanket beside the saddle and his bed was ready for the night.



THE little burro sniffed interestedly at a cactus, and the black horse pawed the ground with one front foot as he munched oats from a nose bag. Marty stared. When he hit it lucky in a poker game, or collected three or four months wages all at once, Bronco had oats and everything else money could buy. But most of the time Bronco and Marty both made out on what they could pick up. They always managed to pick up enough to last them through to the next stop.

The black horse, a delicate, high-strung thing, would starve to death if he had to rustle his own grub. When he had finished the oats he wandered to the end of his

picket rope, sniffing disdainfully at the grass around the spring. Joe Kales gathered an armful of twigs, and threw them down on the ground. He touched a match to them, and crackling flame climbed through the twigs.

"Had supper?" the sheriff inquired.

"Yeh," Marty lied. "I et about an hour before I come in."

Joe Kales laid thick slices of bacon in a skillet, and held it over the fire. When they were cooked he strung them on a stick beside the fire, to keep warm, and fried bread in the grease.

Marty's nostrils twitched. For three days he had feasted sumptuously on the fillets, hams, and saddles of tough desert-bred jackrabbits that he had snared—and the last of that had been eaten this morning. But there were some places where a man had to draw the line. You could smoke your captor's tobacco. But you just didn't eat his grub. Marty waited until Joe Kales finished eating, then he asked casually:

"We goin' back over Furnace Flats?"

Joe Kales shook his head. "No, worse luck. I'd like to because it's shorter. But one of the cans sprung a leak and I can't pack enough water. We'll leave the burro here and go by Duck Springs and Crow Wallow."

Marty hesitated a moment. "I did gun that Ferrere," he said bluntly. "I called him for cheatin' at cards, an' I give him the drew when he went for his gun."

Joe Kales' voice was very low, and very ugly. "Antonio Ferrere was the squarest gambler in Coyote. He did not play with marked cards. And anybody who gave him the draw would not be sitting here telling me about it."

Marty nodded. A good many things he had only guessed before were very clear now. The sheriff was running Coyote, largely as a benefit enterprise for one Joe Kales. He was cutting in on the gamblers' take, and he was also going to prove that Coyote was safe for whoever cared to take Ferrere's place. Marty would be hanged with due ceremony, and anyone else rash enough to call Coyote's gamblers crooked could take adequate warning. That was the way the cards looked now.

"I'm going to handcuff you tonight," the sheriff said irritably. "I hope you

won't mind." His eyes were cold on Marty.

"Not at all," Marty drawled. "I never did sleep sound without I was handcuffed."

Marty lay down, and felt the steel cuffs being locked about both ankles. For a moment Joe Kales leaned over, studying his face, and Marty peered stolidly back. But when the sheriff disappeared in the darkness Marty leaned over and pressed his hot cheek to the cool sand.



THE sun had not burned through the mornig haze when they started out. The black horse danced and tossed his head while he was being saddled, and as soon as his rider was up he flashed away into the desert. Marty watched him, running as though his feet scorned the ground, a black whirlwind of dash and beauty. He whirled to come racing back, and when he drew up beside Marty he was scarcely breathing hard.

Marty's heart grew big within him, seeing that horse run did things to a horseman. But at the same time Marty was sober because he knew exactly what that exhibition was.

It was a big sign, with red letters ten feet high against a white background. It said, "Marty Sollers, if you've got any fool ideas in your head, watch how easy I can ride down that plug of yours." Only in another way it was a foolish waste of the black horse's strength because Marty hadn't needed such a sign. He had played enough poker to know that the ace of spades and a one-eyed jack couldn't win against a royal flush.

The little burro, left behind at the spring, brayed loud and derisively at these fools who would leave such good water and brouse to go out in the desert again.

Marty swung in the saddle, looked back, and grinned. Bronco, himself, and the burro—they had a lot in common. None of them had risen very high in the world, and all any of them wanted was to enjoy whatever they had while they had it. The one thing none of them could stand was having their toes stepped on—that was very important.

But it was somehow a comforting

thought that one of the three, the burro, had found his heaven and now was free to make of it whatever he saw fit. Or at least he was free until the next prospector drifted into Silver Springs and loaded him up again. But burros were pretty smart, and maybe this one would be smart enough to hide.

Suddenly the heat was upon them. It came without any warning, as though someone had opened a valve full force. Sweat crept from under the black horse's saddle blanket and stained his satin-smooth flank. But the big canteen on Sheriff Joe Kales' saddle horn held a gallon of water, and the smaller one that swung at his belt held another two quarts. Six quarts of water would last the sheriff, and the magnificent horse he rode, through ten hours. Marty regarded his own two quart canteen. It was enough, all he and Bronco needed. He guessed they could go to hell and back on two quarts of water.

The black horse dipped his head three times and swung it up again. Marty glanced sideways, and then he felt a tremendous irritation that blossomed into great anger. A man was a man and a horse was a horse, but between the two there was a great difference that never could be bridged by the fact that they were both flesh and blood.

A man was supposed to have a special kind of brains, and when he found himself in some fool predicament he wasn't supposed to blame anyone but himself for being there. But a horse, and especially so fine a horse as the one Joe Kales rode . . .

The sheriff owned him, and certainly nobody was going to try and take him away. But in another sense the sheriff was not the sole owner of the black. Even though all they could do was look at him he belonged to tired ranchers who, after fighting an endless and apparently hopeless battle against everything that can beset a rancher, could ride in, look at the black, say, "The Lord has made a fine thing," and ride away feeling that, after all, there might be something on their side. The black belonged to drifting cowpokes, to children, to everyone who could dream about and love a fine horse. And certainly he had no business out in this burning

desert. Bronco did. He had been born here, and knew what to expect.

The black was a delicate, high-strung thing whose very beauty and fineness lay in his delicacy. And right now, more than anything else, he needed a drink of water. Marty tapped Bronco on the neck, and the little horse trotted ahead. When he got far enough ahead, Marty decided he would swing crosswise to the trail and just sit there. Then maybe Joe Kales would catch on to what was wanted.

But the sheriff had already caught on. Marty swung around to see him with his hat in one hand and the gallon canteen in the other. He poured water into the hat, and held it where the black horse could drink.

Joe Kales, he had thought, was just another slob who had turned to his own benefit a talent for man-hunting and gun-slinging. There had been, and was, nothing to change that opinion. But Marty knew now that the sheriff was also a horseman, and that he loved his horse. It wasn't just that he was giving the black a drink—anybody could water a horse—but it was in the way the sheriff balanced, the way he stood, and in the way the black looked at him. Marty swung around and faced the opposite direction. He didn't like to have anybody watching him when he looked that way at Bronco.

The sun glared down, and sent shimmering heat waves dancing up. Marty rode ahead, and did not look back. He didn't feel the scorching heat, and if Bronco felt it he did not complain. But back there, in spite of his drink, the black horse was going through his own special brand of hell and that would not be pleasant to watch.

Then, finally, Marty saw the needle spire that marked Duck Springs. The spire was a high one, that could be seen an hour's ride away, and Marty waited for the quickened pace that would tell him that Bronco saw it too. But Bronco didn't respond, and Marty frowned. He turned around to see Joe Kales again dismounted, pouring the last of the gallon canteen into his hat and adding to it from the two quart one, and for some reason the sight worried him.

He waited for the sheriff to catch up. The black horse tossed his head and blew

a fine spray of water. He was again the magnificent thing that had started out this morning—water was indeed magic. Joe Kales grinned from the saddle. He had figured things right, he always did that. In one more hour they would have all the water they needed.

But still Bronco did not respond. And even before they rode up to where Duck Springs had been Marty knew what they would find there. A sun-baked hole, with with cracks reaching deep into the earth. Marty reached up and pulled the thorn out of his hat so the brim would fall over his eyes and cover them, he did not want to see what Joe Kales looked like just then, and he didn't want the sheriff to look at him either.

Marty dismounted, poured a pint of water into his own hat and gave it to Bronco. He squeezed the few remaining drops out of the hat into his throat, and made his bed.

Bronco grazed on the scorched shrubbery, and came in at midnight to stand with lowered head over Marty. Marty hoped that he was asleep. He must be, since dreams so horrible happened only in sleep. But usually they passed.

This one did not however. Try as he would, Marty could not shut from his mind's eye the picture of the sheriff's black horse refusing his oats, then going down to a dry water hole and pawing about there, dumbly asking the two human beings with him to wave their magic wands so the water would again flow.



THE black horse stood at the end of his picket rope, facing into the light wind, when Marty got up and saddled Bronco. His head was erect, but a certain tired sag in his tail and body told its own story. He would probably get through to Crow Wallow. But after the sun came up he would again go through hell for every hour of the ten.

Marty tried to bring a little moisture to his tongue by working it around in his mouth. But there wouldn't be any drinks now for either himself or Bronco. Wait until they really needed it. Marty swung into the saddle, and waited for Joe Kales to start.

The black horse pranced by, stepping high, mouthing the bit and tossing his head to prove that he was not at all jaded, and that even the small restraint of a bridle and reins was entirely too much to bear. Marty sat in the saddle, calculating the exact chances of killing Joe Kales if he was fool enough to run that horse again.

But the sheriff only rode past, and pulled the prancing black into a walk. Bronco glanced once at the canteen on Marty's belt, and fell in behind as if drinking didn't matter anyway. Marty's hand slipped affectionately down to Bronco's tattered mane, and the tightness in his throat was not all induced by thirst.

They were three hours out of Duck Springs when Joe Kales dismounted to walk. Marty looked at the black horse, and saw the shame that crept over him at this unprecedented humiliation. Marty had lived too close to horses not to know the enormous pride that good ones take in their work. Once he had seen an old plow horse, retired by an indulgent owner, spend half its time nickering over the pasture gate for someone to come put its harness back on. And the black horse, whose job was to carry Joe Kales, knew now why his master was walking. Marty clenched his jaw, waiting for the fool to get back in the saddle.

But Joe Kales did not get back up. Marty slid off Bronco to loop the reins over his arm and plod along behind. Even without a rider the black horse's steps were no longer the beautifully timed, rhythmic ones that they had been. They were varying, a little longer or a little shorter than the black horse's body conformation said he should take while walking.

Often, too often, the black raised his head to peer about the sun-scorched country through which they traveled.

For two hours more they walked along under the broiling sun. Then Joe Kales stopped and took off his hat. He poured into it the pitifully small amount of water remaining in his hat, and held it up so the black horse could drink. Marty glanced down at his own canteen, and looked away again. That water was for himself and Bronco. No law of God or man said

that anything or anybody else owned a single drop. And, that being the case, Marty did not know exactly why he found himself beside Joe Kales with the canteen in his hand.

"Take it," his voice was a husky croak.

Marty stood back, watching the black horse drink up the three pints of water that had been in his canteen. Bronco should be drinking it. But Bronco was a desert horse, who understood quite well the fierce torture that the desert could bring to anything not used to it. He would approve of this if only he could talk. And, before anything else, Marty was a horseman. A bullet through the brain was the best thing the black horse could have now if they reached Crow Wallow and found that dry. But he would not suffer quite so much in getting there.

Crow Wallow was not dry. Marty knew it when they were still forty-five minutes away, and Bronco began to strain forward. He knew other things too, and one of them was that Bronco and himself did not have much of a chance anyway if they rode into Crow Wallow with Joe Kales. So they might as well take this one. Marty climbed into the saddle.

"Goodbye," he sang out as he rode past Joe Kales.

A bullet whined within two inches of his ear, and another, and another. But, even though Marty was sure that the black horse could easily overtake himself and Bronco, he was positive that he would not hear the thunder of the black horses' hoofs or see Joe Kales beside him.

You could bank on a lot of things when you were certain that a man really loved his horse. Marty let Bronco drink sparingly at Crow Wallow, filled his canteen, and rode out again. Joe Kales and the black horse were not yet in sight. They would make it all right. But the black horse would need a long rest, and while he was getting that Marty and Bronco could be well over the border.

Marty wondered as he rode along. Joe Kales was a wonderful shot. You would almost think that the easiest thing for him to hit, if he really wanted to, was a man on a running bronco.

Yeah, Marty thought, if he really wanted to.

The VALLEY of

WRITTEN AND



He didn't have a chance!

WINDAS 1943

VENGEANCE

ILLUSTRATED

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



"Drink hearty," Sheriff Clark told his prisoners. But a grim bystander remarked, "On the Brazos we give rustlers lariats—not likker!" That was the start of this saga of slaughter—when dry-gulchers ascended to their deadliest gun glory!

THE trio of horsemen clattered across the little wooden bridge that led into Mason, and scuffed a dusty trail along the cowtown's lone apology for a street until they stopped at the hitchrail of the Drover's Rest.

The two riders in the lead did not dismount, for the simple reason their legs were tied with ropes that passed beneath their ponies' bellies, and their wrists secured to the horn of its owner's saddle.

The man who had herded them thus far, stepped from his big roan, wiping dust and sweat from his sun-baked face as he dismounted.

Watching his prisoners cautiously, he stopped outside the batwing doors of the saloon, and lifted his voice in a roar that brought immediate attention.

"Three long beers for three thirsty gents all the way from Loyal Valley," he called, and as those inside came out quickly in answer to his hail, he moved backward to prop himself against the hitchrail.

A bald-headed barkeep poked his head over the batwings long enough to ascertain the source of the disturbance and withdrew like a turtle into its shell, only to re-appear a moment later with the liquid refreshment.

A curious group gathered to watch the new arrivals. "See y'got the buzzards, Sheriff," said one, speaking as impersonally as if discussing runaway beeves. "Have any trouble fetching 'em in?"

"Nope," said the peace-officer. "I had to wing this one," pointing to a rustler whose forearm was wrapped in a bloody

rag, "but Baccus ain't hurt much."

As he spoke, he busied himself untying the left hands of his captives and handing each a froth-capped schooner. "Drink hearty," he invited, adding gruffly, "because its gonna be a long time before you get another."

"That's Lige Baccus, the wounded gent, and the other's his cousin," volunteered an idler in the crowd to one who was apparently a stranger, "Sheriff Clark nabbed 'em for rustlin', and they're on their way to the hoosegow."

"That ain't the way we treat rustlers whar I come from," rejoined his companion, "On the Brazos we give 'em lariats, not likker."

"Stick around a while, stranger," said the first, "Yuh ain't seen nothin' yet. A charge of cattle-stealing in Mason County is practically a sentence of death. The whole town aims to be in on the necktie-party. It ain't right when only a few has the fun of hangin' 'em."

Meantime, their beer finished, the prisoners sat their horses in sullen dejection, while the westering sun laid its fierce ray across their drooping figures to add to their discomfort and misery. Neither man uttered a word, not even to thank the sheriff for the drink.

One by one the little crowd broke up and returned to the shady seclusion of the bar. Even the stuffiness of the saloon was preferable to the glaring heat outside.

The lawman scrubbed rime from his moistened lips with a calloused thumb, and handed his empty beer-pot to the barkeep.

"Let's go, fellas," he growled to Lige and his kinsman, and gathering the reins of the two horses walked down the dusty street to the jail. His big roan followed like a trained circus horse.

Not until they were behind lock and bar did the arrested men break their silence. There were already three other prisoners in the cell, two of whom, Turley and Johnson, were also under suspicion for cattle-stealing. The third, an unknown itinerant, was serving a short term for drunkenness.

"Why in hell," said Lige to his cousin, "didn't you let me know the sheriff was waitin' when I rode up?"

"How could I?" retorted the other,

"He had me covered, and by the time you put your horse into the corral and brung your saddle into the barn, it was too late. Yuh shouldn't ha' oughta tried to outdraw him, neither. All yuh got for your trouble was a chunk shot outa your arm. An' seein' you tried to shoot him won't help our case any."

Through the rest of the afternoon, in the sweltering confines of their cramped quarters, the five men discussed their problems, including chances of escape. Along about sundown a deputy brought them supper, after which the prisoners stretched out on their cots, seeking surcease in slumberland from the worries of the day.

With the coming of dusk, lights winked from windows of the Drover's Rest, from Hunter's Hotel and other places which catered to what night-life the little cowtown offered.

But tonight there was a sinister undercurrent, an intangible something that kept Sheriff Clark watching in his office with brooding distrust long after he should have sought his rest.

Save only for the horses tied at hitch-rails, the little street was deserted. Too many men had gathered inside the Drover's Rest and stayed there. The customary loud laughter and bursts of drunken song were missing tonight from this popular saloon.

Clark remembered the outspoken reference to "necktie parties" voiced by the crowd in the afternoon, and his eyes grew troubled.



AN EASY going man in his way, the sheriff took his responsibilities seriously. There'd be no flaunting of the Law while he wore the badge.

Finally he could stand the inaction no longer, and made his way to Hunter's Hotel where he knew Dan Roberts of the Texas Rangers was registered.

He found the captain sympathetic and ready to co-operate in case of a disturbance.

Together they walked over to the courthouse, nor were they any too soon.

Silhouetted in a vague mass against the yellow glare of light from the doorway

and windows of the Drover's Rest, an excited mob of townsmen were moving out in the direction of the jail.

From an upstairs window of the courthouse, the sheriff covered the front of the jail with his Winchester.

Rapidly the crowd neared its goal, moving through the night with ominous undulations like a snake whose head reached almost to the courthouse steps even while its tail was emerging from the doorway of the saloon.

Clark waited until the leaders were about directly below him; then he spoke in a voice no less menacing because of its casual coldness.

"I wouldn't try it, boys," he said. Then as the foremost of the mob stiffened in their tracks and tried to locate the speaker in the black gaps of the darkened windows above, he added:

"Them that I miss, Cap'n Roberts of the Rangers and my deputy Jim Trainer, who are with me, *won't* miss. Go back to the Drover's Rest, or better still, go home and fergit it. If those rannies in the hoosegow is guilty, the Law will give 'em what's comin' to 'em."

Voices cursed him in answer. Others more conciliatory suggested a pow-wow. Down there in the darkness the sheriff could hear men suggesting, whispering, arguing back and forth in low murmurs as they strove to maintain their place before the courthouse.

But what neither Clark nor Roberts even faintly guessed, was that the whispered bickering below was a quick and clever plot, timed to give several who detached themselves from the mob a chance to sneak up the backstairs of the courthouse.

First thing the lawmen knew, they were trapped under the guns of intruders who covered them from the rear.

The trouble-makers disarmed the sheriff and his companions and leading them from the courthouse, warned them to stay away from the vicinity until the grim business was over.

But the conscientious Clark was persistent in his endeavors to uphold the law.

Leaving Roberts and Trainer to watch the movements of the mob, he went to work rounding up the more lawful elements in Mason.

BY THE time he returned with the rescue party, however, the lynchers had already torn down the door of the jail and led their victims away from the town to a convenient clump of cottonwoods.

When Clark and his men approached the sinister spot, Baccus and his cousin were swinging from a high bough.

The mob was in the act of hanging Turley and Johnson as the sheriff shouted for them to surrender their prisoners.

His arrival was too much for the courage of the lynchers to stomach, and tarrying only long enough to blow out the brains of the luckless and innocent unknown cowboy whom they had dragged from his cell, they scattered into the night like deer before a cougar.

Even as they ran, however, they attempted to shoot Johnson. But that nimble worthy, with a roar of blasphemous defiance, leaped a fence and vanished into the darkness.

Turley was cut down and restored by Sheriff Clark, but the Baccus boys were beyond aid. They had gone to the Great Range where cowmen rest forever, untroubled by the prejudice and passion of mortal minds.

So the sum and total of that wild night was three quiet corpses laid out on trestle tables in the back of Mason's Hardware Emporium.

But the tally changed a little in the early hours of the morning. For the vengeful Johnson, tattered and torn from his recent manhandling, waylaid Tod Kersch who had put the noose around Turley's throat.

Tod was opening his front gate when Johnson jumped him and, seizing the man's rifle, filled Kersch with more metal than had ever been in that hombre's make-up before.

Having thus fulfilled his purpose, Johnson fled to fresh pastures and passed completely out of the Mason County picture.

This left the score at three to one in favor of the Mason townsmen—and started a feud that swept like a devastating fire through all the far-flung boundaries of the County.

Lord help the poor cowboy seen on Mason's rough-hewn street after dark.

And pity the lone townsman whose business took him over the trails of the rangeland.

Even legal chicanery was invoked as one faction sought revenge against the other.

Take the case of Tim Williamson, tophand for a big county cattleman. Tim was shaping up a herd for the Chisolm when deputy sheriff John Worley came looking for him with a warrant charging certain manipulations of the brands identifying the very herd in question.

Now Tim's boss was a man of action and offered to post bond for his tophand's appearance, but the deputy insisted he must take Tim to town.

This made the ranch owner suspicious, so that he announced his intention of making the long ride back with them, which he was allowed to do providing he rode unarmed.

They had barely crossed the ranch boundary line when they were pursued by a fast moving cavalcade.

The deputy's prisoner begged for his gun, which Worley had annexed at the time of the arrest, and asked to be allowed to ride on to the safety of the sheriff's office, while the deputy tried to delay the crowd until Tim was well on his way to safety.

But Worley refused to release him, although importuned by both men.

The pursuers rapidly overhauled the trio, and from their shouts and imprecations as they swept nearer there was no doubt they were bent on mischief.

Seeing that escape was impossible, Williamson turned and faced his peril boldly, for he was a man of resolute character.

His two companions halted also, though Worley edged both his own horse and that of the rancher to one side of the trail, leaving his prisoner to face the crowd alone.

The pursuers thundered to a standstill around Tim, as their mounts put the brakes on in typical cowpony fashion.

The dust swirled and eddied about them in great clouds as the mob cursed and struck at the man they intended to destroy.

It almost obscured them from the horrified eyes of the rancher—but it didn't hide the flashes nor dull the heavy boom of

the guns which blasted Tim Williamson from his saddle.

Even after the crowd had ridden away accompanied by the deputy, the dust seemed loath to settle, but hung over Tim's body like a golden gauze, as if ashamed to let such a pleasant countryside witness so foul a deed.



NOW if deputy Worley considered the Williamson incident closed, he reckoned without the dead man's intimate friends. For instance there was Scott Cooley, ex-Ranger and one of the toughest hombres in Texas.

This gent no sooner heard of Tim's murder than he went on the prod in a big way, as did also George Gladden, John Ringgold, Jack Beard and his happy-go-lucky brother Mose.

They met one night and drafted a list of Mason citizens who had instigated the lynching of the Baccus boys, or had ridden in the cavalcade of death which slew Williamson.

However, while Gladden and Mose Beard were riding away from this meeting, they were trapped in Keller's store on the Llano River by a Mason mob bent on their extermination. The two cowboys put up a good fight, but a bullet, which glanced from a door post smashed into Gladden's face, breaking his cheekbone and temporarily blinding him.

Half crazy with the pain George nevertheless continued shooting. Feeling the end was near, he begged Mose to jump on his horse while there was yet time and make his getaway. This his friend refused to do, stoutly maintaining they'd see this thing through together.

But he agreed with George they had better try and break away before completely surrounded.

So he led the wounded man to the rear of the little store where they had tied the horses, and managed to get him mounted. In the running fight which followed they rode as far as Beaver Creek, but loss of blood made it impossible for Gladden to go on further.

Again he begged Mose to leave him, but the intrepid little man was determined to bring his comrade through to safety.

He hid Gladden under a woodpile and covered him with brush while he rode away to find a wagon in which to bring George home.

He found the wagon all right, and got back to the woodpile. But even as he jumped down and announced the cheering news to his hidden pardner, a blast of gunshots flung him hard against the sheltering logs, and he paid for his loyalty with his life.

The mob then dragged Gladden from his concealment and propped him up against a tree to execute him. They had to tie him for by this time he was unable to support himself.

But Fate intervened at the last moment. For the storekeeper Keller, who had ridden with the man-hunters, protested so bitterly and resolutely at this needless butchery that the mob relented, and allowed George to be placed in the wagon and driven home.

So after all, Mose Beard's loyalty paid dividends.



THE period that followed the murder of Mose was a reign of terror. Cowboys were killed from ambush; townsmen were called to their front doors and viciously slain. No case was brought to trial; no charge was ever fairly proved. Which only goes to show that neither side was guiltless in this ruthless feud which spilled the best blood in the county—for no better reason than that a man belonged to the rival faction.

And so the beast Vendetta rode high, wide, and awesome over town and countryside.

There was an appalling callousness displayed in the murderers' technique the night Hi Cheney kept his rendezvous with the Grim Reaper. Hi opened his front door in response to a loud "Hello." From the dark street a voice inquired "Are yuh comin' with us peaceable, Cheney?"

From the same shadows, a slightly bored second voice asked: "Why bother him? Let's get it over right here." So Cheney died on his own threshold, with the tears and sobs of his horrified wife his sole requiem.

Who did the job? No one will ever

know. Someone went so far as to indict John Ringold, but nobody could prove anything.

About this time George Gladden's face-wound had healed, and he was ready and willing to exact revenge for the loss of his good friend Mose. The latter's brother, John Beard, was a cheerful accomplice to the scheme, so that one wet night they rode into Mason under the dismal cloak of the downpour, and added to the Feud's ghastly tally-book one Dan Hoerster, a leading merchant of the town.

Hoerster got in one shot which cost Gladden a finger, then the cowboys had vanished into the murk of the night, leaving their victim dead in the midst of his merchandise.

But this killing aroused a hornet's nest in Mason, for the merchant was both prominent and well respected.

Sheriff Clark gathered a posse of four-score irate citizens and really went into the enemy's stronghold in search of the gunnies who had cut down Hoerster.

A battle royal ensued near Loyal Valley between the fighting men of both factions, in which eighteen or nineteen died with their boots on.

But it didn't settle anything, for although the townsmen withdrew under cover of darkness to recuperate and refit, the cowboys didn't feel strong enough to follow up their advantage and chase the enemy clear back to town.

So the armies of both sides disbanded, so to speak, and resumed the more familiar tactics of night-riding and bush-whacking.

This was a little slower in actual results, but still the death-list mounted consistently, and then Scott Cooley staged a one-man drama that busted things wide open.

For a long time Cooley had nursed his rancor against deputy Worley for the latter's part in Tim Williamson's death.

The ex-ranger even went so far as to claim that Worley had shot Tim's horse so that the cowboy couldn't escape.

Where he got the idea will never be known, for the rancher who had been with his tophand on that fateful occasion denied all knowledge of such action, and naturally he would have been a willing witness had such a thing occurred.

Be that as it may, Tim was dead—and Cooley was determined to square accounts. Hearing that Worley was assisting a neighbor to dig a well, Scott carefully oiled and reloaded his Winchester, and sauntered over to view the proceedings.

He found Worley in the act of winding up a windlass, hauling his neighbor out of the hole they were digging.

The neighbor's head was just visible as Cooley approached but disappeared from view with a rush as the startled Worley let go the windlass crank and froze in his tracks.

Cooley wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Yuh didn't give Tim Williamson no chance," he said, cold-voiced and bleak-eyed, "an' so I'm not givin' you none."

With the words he emptied the Winchester into Worley at point-blank range, and the deputy slumped to the ground lifeless.

Scott calmly reloaded the gun; leaning the weapon against the windlass, he produced a knife and gathered Worley's scalp and ears as ghastly trophies of the chase.

Having done which he collected his rifle, and running back to the livery stable saddled his horse and spurred away furiously for the sanctuary of the hills.

Cold-blooded and gruesome as the killing of Worley undoubtedly was, it had one good result, for it proved to be the beginning of the end of the feud.

The bare-faced murder of the lawman in open daylight brought the Texas Rangers fully into the picture, and when these gents in white Stetsons start anything they always finish it.

But even Rangers have a human side, which Captain Roberts had to check before he could accomplish his mission of taming Mason County.

♦ ♦ ♦

SCOTT COOLEY, it will be remembered, had been a member of the Rangers, and although he was now a fugitive from Justice, comrades in his old company "D" were not so keen on his capture as they should have been.

Night after night, as the Rangers sat around their campfire for supper, an extra figure might have been noted in the gathering; a figure that kept forever in

the shadows as though avoiding recognition.

Captain Roberts discovered him by accident, and though Cooley made a desperate dash into the night and escaped, the commanding officer made it impossible for Scott to repeat his nocturnal visits.

He let his men know in no uncertain terms that personal friendships would not be tolerated when they clashed with the stern call of Duty.

He offered to release from this particular assignment any of his men to whom the job of hunting down Cooley was distasteful.

Ten or twelve men promptly stepped out of the ranks, and these Captain Roberts detailed to patrol the town itself.

Which goes to prove our point that even the tough and rigorous Rangers had a very human side.

When Pete Barder was ambushed on the way into town he had the distinction of being the last victim of this senseless feud.

Lawrence Miller, who was riding alongside Pete at the time, heard the heavy roar of the gun from a nearby clump of trees and saw Barder sag into his saddle with blood streaming from a wound in his chest.

The man was hard hit and dazed, for he made no effort to get away from the danger zone. He just sat there and groaned.

Miller grabbed the bridle of the wounded man's horse, and endeavored to lead it behind a sheltering rock some few feet down the road.

But even as he did so, a second shot caught Barder in the side, so that he threw up his hands and toppled into the dust.

A third shot knocked Miller's hat off, and seeing no sense in staying there as a target for the unseen marksman he raked his horse all the way into Mason to spread the news.

The Rangers discovered that Pete had been present at the death of Mose Beard, so putting two and two together they called on George Gladden, and found that gent busy cleaning a Sharp's rifle whose ammunition tallied suspiciously with three empty cartridges found not far from Barder's body.

Gladden went on trial for the slaying and reaped a staggering sentence of ninety-nine years, which would seem to suggest that the jury was somewhat prejudiced. For after all the only thing they could hang on George were the coincident cartridges.

This would also seem to be the opinion of the Higher Courts for Gladden was pardoned after serving a few months.

But the fact that the man had been brought to trial by due process of Law, instead of being bushwhacked in reprisal by self-styled executioners, showed that the long arm of legal Justice was re-establishing itself, and the days of the feud were numbered.

The case against John Ringgold was dismissed. Cooley was never arrested for the Worley job; but reading the handwriting on the wall, he forsook the hills of Mason and returned to his home range in Blanco County.

Sheriff Clark, for reasons best known to himself, also left the district. Some claim he showed too much latitude for his friends in town, too much personal

feeling against the cowboys of Loyal Valley.

His records show him as a conscientious officer, and although he failed to quell the feud by himself, this is no great reflection on his capabilities, for it was too big a job for a man to deal with single-handed.

So the Rangers tamed the county, as they tamed so many other counties before and since.

No longer did a townsman fear to go unarmed to his front door when greeted from outside.

No more did the cowboys, riding in under the Texas moon from some line-hut in the hills, check rein and glare suspiciously at a strange shadow thrown athwart the trail ahead.

Housewives sang as they went about their work, or gossiped with neighbors in shop or store; and children played where lately Death had stalked.

Lights winked brightly in the windows of the Drover's Rest and men came and went unscathed.

For peace had at last come to Mason County.



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FEUDIST LORD of SKULL BASIN

By
**MORGAN
LEWIS**

"No!" yelled Dave.



The gaunt, forbidding shadow of the feuding Angus McGrath blighted the wedding of young Dave to the daughter of a rival gun-quick clan. But Dave grimly played love against hate, and found, strangely, that he might win—by holding the loser's hand!

THE GIRL dropped her head on his chest and shivered. "I'm afraid, Davey." Dave McGrath looked down at the warm brown hair and his arms tightened protectively about her slim figure.

"There's no need to be frightened," he said, but even as he spoke, a note of anxiety crept into his voice. "Besides," he added, "he doesn't know I'm here."

Katey Trowbridge lifted her head and pushed a little away so she could look him full in the face. "Dave," she said, "even

if he is your father, he's a hard, cruel man. Some day he is going to find out that we are seeing each other and then—" Her voice trailed away but the shadowy fear in her deep brown eyes finished the sentence for her.

Dave McGrath straightened and took a deep breath. The spring sunlight, filtering through the trees, touched his sandy hair. This, and his straight back, he had inherited from his father, Angus McGrath, but his blue eyes and height had come from his dead English mother. Also her gentleness and fairness of spirit to temper the iron strain of the McGraths.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll be twenty-one. I'll tell him then that you and I are going to marry."

Katey's white hands gripped his arms tensely. "You mustn't!" she gasped and the color drained from her face. "Dave, he'd kill you! It would be better if we were married and went far away, so you wouldn't have to bear the brunt of his anger."

Dave's face was pale and drawn but his eyes were steady. "No," he said quietly, "that wouldn't do. I know that he's blind to any side of a question but his own—but, he is my father. Since mother died, ten years ago, he has never lifted his hand to me. I couldn't leave without first telling him and giving him a chance to be fair."

A hint of pride came into the girl's dark eyes as she looked at his haggard young face. "Very well," she said softly. "If you can be brave, so can I." She disengaged herself from his arms and walked over to her horse. "Shall we tell my family?"

Dave's lips tightened a little. "Might as well," he said. "It has to be done sooner or later."

Katey swung into the saddle before he could help her. Dave mounted his roan. Side by side they rode out of the stand of cottonwood and splashed across the shallow river.

On the far side, bands of sheep were strung out grazing, and a touch of bitterness came into Dave's face. "If it wasn't for this strip of land, there wouldn't be trouble between our families."

Katey nodded unhappily and they rode on. The strip of land in question would

have offered no basis for argument if the river could have served as a boundary line between the holdings of the two Skull Basin sheepmen. Instead, the strip lay between the two forks of the river.

The McGrath holdings lay to the south of the south fork. The land of the Trowbridges was beyond the north branch. And the strip in between had not been of much importance but, as the McGrath herds had grown, Angus had reached out for more land and had secured the patent rights to this strip bounded by the two forks.

Formerly, the herds of both families had grazed there, but Angus had served notice on Sam Trowbridge to keep his sheep on his own land and had posted guards with rifles along the north branch to see that his edict was enforced.

The result was bitterness and bad feeling throughout Skull Basin, for other small ranchers beside Trowbridge had used the strip.

As Angus gained sheep and acres, he lost friends. But if it bothered the big sheepman, he gave no sign. Since the death of his wife he had become a grim and dour man, living alone in the gloomy ranch-house with only Dave and the Chinese cook. The growing enmity of his neighbors served only to harden him in his ways.



THEY stopped in front of the Trowbridge ranch-house and Katey looked across at Dave. "You'd better wait here until I go in and break the news to them," she said with a nervous little smile.

He nodded soberly and watched while she climbed the steps to the porch and went inside. The square-built Trowbridge house was smaller than his father's, but there was an air of warmth and hospitality about it that his own home was lacking. The big barn, where square dances were sometimes held, and the rest of the out buildings sprawled comfortably, giving a sense of heart-cheering serenity.

The door opened and Sam Trowbridge came down the steps. He was a medium-sized man, corpulent, with a cheery red face, a pair of humorous gray eyes, and

a bald head surrounded by a thin fringe of graying hair.

Dave stepped from the saddle and went to meet him. They shook hands. Sam Trowbridge smiled at the questioning look on Dave's face. Then his became serious.

"Dave," he said kindly, "I've known you ever since you were knee high to a grasshopper, and there isn't any one I'd rather give my girl to. But," he continued slowly, "do you reckon this is a good time to get hitched? It won't set so good with Angus."

Dave ran a harrassed hand through his thick hair. Sam's first words had eased the weight in his chest but now the old trouble and uncertainty flowed back again.

"I know," he said. "Katey and I have talked it over. I'll be twenty-one tomorrow, and after that he can't stop me. We don't want to stir up more trouble, so we figured we'd head for some other part of the country and start from scratch."

Sam nodded slowly. "That might be best. We'll hate to lose Katey but we won't stand in her way. As to stirrin' up more trouble," he continued gravely, "I'm afraid its already on the way. Now that Angus has got the strip, some of the smaller outfits hereabout are going to be hard pressed for range. There's been some ugly talk. I've been trying to hold them back—" He broke off and shook his head.

"If it comes to an open break I'll have to side with my neighbors. It might be better if you and Katey were far away. . . . When were you fixing to get hitched?"

"Tomorrow night," said Dave soberly. "There's no sense in waiting—things are only getting worse."

Sam nodded. "I cal'late you're right. I'm driving to town in the forenoon and I'll bring the preacher back with me."

Katey and her mother came out on the porch and Mrs. Trowbridge called, "I'll be right glad to have you for a son, Dave, but I can't say as I'm surprised."

A sudden lump in Dave's throat made answering difficult but he managed a grin and she seemed to understand.

Katey came down to him. When Sam went back in the house with his wife, Katey said softly, "I wish you didn't have to go back."

Dave smiled at her, to conceal the cold nervousness within him. "It's the last time I'll have to leave you," he said, "but I've got to get back now. Wolves have been hanging around the flocks and dad has got some of his prize sheep penned up so they'll be safe. They're due to lamb any day now and I've got to feed them. Dad doesn't think any more of those sheep than his right arm—but just as much."

He kissed her openly and stepped into the saddle. He smiled reassuringly at her and headed for home. But as soon as he was out of sight the cold, heavy weight came back in his stomach. Dread of what he had to do stiffened his face and made his arms and legs feel like lead. Yet it had to be done. He simply couldn't walk off without so much as a word of explanation.

"Maybe he won't mind so much," he muttered—and immediately shook his head. Angus McGrath would never forgive what he considered disloyalty, and his wrath would be terrible to see.

Dave debated as to whether he should warn him of the attitude of the smaller outfits across the river, but he decided against it. Rumor had a way of traveling and his father probably already knew of it. "Let 'em come!" he would say. "If they're looking for trouble—they can have it!"

That was Angus McGrath's way; harsh and cold, sure that he was right, driving head on into trouble, smashing down anyone who opposed him.

A dreary bleakness grew in Dave's face as the roan reeled off the miles.



THE house reared starkly before him, grim and forbidding as its master. Judge, the giant sheep dog, was lying on the shaded porch and Dave knew that his father was in. Grim and efficient, his long frontlet of hair hanging over his eyes, the big dog was never far from Angus McGrath.

Dave put up the roan and crossed to the stack of wild hay. He took the fork and carried a load into the shed where the sheep were kept.

He shoved the door inward with his foot and entered the dim interior. There was a sudden clatter as the sheep backed timidly away, their silly white faces

turned up questioningly toward him.

Dave piled the hay in a corner and went back for more. There was no fight in a sheep, he thought. Against a wolf, a herd of long-horn steers would wage savage warfare with hooves and horns. But a band of sheep would simply break and run blindly, crying out in their weak, blating voices. And once they were down, they were through. They simply gave up and died. He had once seen a sheep-killing dog at work in a flock. The dog ran up to the sheep, seized her by the throat and threw himself clean over her back, his weight pulling the sheep off her feet and down. Then he had torn out her throat.

Dave finished feeding them and went up to the house, while dread watered the blood in his veins. He entered the dining room where two places were laid at the long table, a relic of the days when the hands used to eat with them. Now that Angus had risen in wealth and power they had a separate eating shack of their own.

Dave paused as his father came from the little office where the accounts of the ranch were kept. The elder McGrath's wide shoulders and powerful frame practically filled the doorway. His reddish hair was brushed with silver at the temples and his face was darkened with the winds of many winters.

He stared at his son with eyes like rust-stained, brown marble. "You're late," he said, not accusingly but as a matter of fact.

Dave nodded. "I was over on the strip," he said noncommittally. He wondered what his father would have said if he had been told the whole truth.

Angus walked over to the five-gallon jug that stood on a stand in the corner and poured himself three fingers of clear amber whiskey. That jug was Angus McGrath's only extravagance. To Dave it was a concrete symbol of his father's growing isolation.

It contained the finest imported Scotch whiskey that money could buy. Not that Angus was a drunkard; far from it. He drank sparingly and in moderation. But he was the only one who drank from it. On the increasingly rare times when men stopped at the big ranch-house, if whiskey was indicated, they got a cheap domestic blend or they got nothing. Angus

would no more have thought of offering a drink of his imported stock than he would have given away one of his prize sheep.

Dave wasn't much for drinking. He had never asked for a drink from the jug, and his father had never offered it. Now Angus held the glass, smelling the bouquet, and then drank slowly, savoring the flavor.

Dave watched him, and moved by a sudden impulse he asked, "Why did you lease the strip? Some of the smaller outfits on the other side are pressed hard for range."

The elder McGrath regarded him witheringly over the glass. "The small outfits are always pressed for range. That's why they're small," he added sardonically.

Although born and bred in this country, the iron of his Scotch ancestors was strong in Angus McGrath's soul and its harsh blackness showed in his face.

"They'll fight!" protested Dave. "I've heard—"

"Aye," said Angus grimly, "so have I. Let them try it! If they bring me trouble I'll ram it down their throats with these two hands!" His fingers caressed the butt of the big Colt that he now wore more from habit than necessity.

A feeling of futility ran through Dave. His father's words left him feeling spiritually bruised and battered. It was like going up against a granite wall. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell of his plans but he knew now that it would only add fuel to the fire of his father's anger.

Angus McGrath sat down in the big arm chair at the head of the table and the cook brought in the meal.



LATE that night, Dave lay in bed opening and closing his hands impotently, cursing his weakness. His father had always had the power to make him feel puny and insignificant—over awed and futile in the face of that iron will and dominant personality.

"Tomorrow," he told himself, "I'll tell him and get it over with. He can't do more than throw me out." His warbag was already packed and stood waiting in the corner of the room.

Now that his last night in the old ranch-house had come, he found that the thought of leaving it caused him a pang of nostalgia. Here he had been born and raised; he remembered his tall graceful mother moving through the low-ceilinged rooms; remembered the soft touch of her hands on his face when he had come running to her with some childish hurt. Things had been different then. It wasn't until after her death that his father had changed.

Dave took a deep breath. "When a man is twenty-one," he assured himself, "it's time he got out on his own." He would go somewhere and build a home for himself—and Katey would be with him.

Later, he fell asleep with the picture of her face in his mind. . . .

It was early morning when Dave awoke, the sun just thrusting its red poll above the eastern hills. He got up and dressed with a clammy nervousness beating in his stomach and making his hands clumsy.

As he went into the hall he saw that the door of his father's room was open and the bed empty.

He paused in the silent dining room for a cup of coffee and went out. He would tell his father after the stock was fed and they had finished breakfast. Angus McGrath might feel better then.

He took the pitching fork and went to the stack for hay. He was bent over under the load and it wasn't until he went to push the door with his foot that he discovered it was already partly open.

Dave stared stupidly at a thin trickle of red as it followed a depression in the floor. Comprehension came to him and with it consternation. He dropped the load and stepped inside.

Just beyond the door in the thin, early morning light, lay a sheep, her head holding the door open and a great, ragged hole in her throat. The rest of the sheep cowered in a corner, staring at him with terrified eyes.

The door quivered as some heavy body moved against it. Dave stepped over the dead sheep and peered into the dim shadows. Two great, gray bodies were locked in a death grip on the floor. As he looked, Judge gave a last vicious shake and released his hold to walk unsteadily past him, but the big timber wolf never stirred.

Judge braced himself by the sheep, the blood from his jaws dying the hair on his great chest. His bloody tongue lolled out and he sucked the air in quick, deep breaths.

A tall shadow blocked out the light and Angus McGrath stepped inside. His eyes went from the dead sheep to the bloody dog—and his face became black and grim.

Dave stared uncomprehendingly at the anger in his father's face but as the older man's hand swept down for his gun, he suddenly understood. "No!" he cried—and stopped short.

Angus McGrath noticed him not at all. "And I figured it was wolves," he said, his voice deep with anger, as the gun swept up. It roared deafeningly within the shed and Judge fell with a soft, incomplete bark. He lay still for an instant and then his feet kicked frenziedly, throwing his big body around in its death struggles, soiling his coat on the bloody floor. The motions became slower and with a final movement of his tail, Judge lay still.

Angus McGrath looked down at him for a long moment before he holstered his gun.

Dave stared at him, white faced. The dog's convulsive movements had shifted the sheep's body and the door swung shut. The wolf, a good two feet longer than Judge and with blood still oozing from his throat, was in full view.

There was only the sound of Angus McGrath's heavy breathing as he gazed long at it, a look of pained comprehension coming over his face. There was a faint anger in his eyes as he raised them to Dave—an anger that grew with the appalling speed of a hurricane and suddenly burst forth in all its violence.

"Ye damned scut!" he roared. "Ye let me kill Judge without lifting a finger to stop me. . . . Ye knew he killed the wolf!"

His great arm swung and the sharp crack of his fist striking was like the sound of a breaking bone. Dave lay on the floor until the darkness lifted and his father's figure came back into focus. He lifted himself to his unsteady legs and when his hand fell away from his bruised jaw, it was red with the blood that had trickled from his mouth.

There was bitter anger in his eyes as he surveyed the man before him. "Maybe I

could have stopped you," he said dully. "I didn't try. . . . I thought making a mistake like that—seeing that you were wrong for once—might prove that you could be wrong in other things. That you can make mistakes like anybody else—"

Dave looked down at the blood on his hand and wiped it awkwardly against his levis. "I was wrong," he continued in the same dead tone. "You can't see any one else's side—only your own. Sheep and land! For ten years I've tried to love you and stand by you the way a son should and all I got was harsh words—and now blows."

He looked the elder McGrath straight in the eye. "I'm through!" he said painfully. "I'm pulling out—and tonight I'll marry Katey Trowbridge."

Angus looked at the shaking boy from under frowning brows. "You'll do nothing without my consent until you're of age," he said levelly.

A crooked, bitter grin pulled at Dave's bruised lips. "I didn't reckon you'd remember," he said. "I'm twenty-one today."

He walked slowly past his father and up to the house. There he scrubbed the blood from his hands and face and brushed his clothes. He slung his warbag over his shoulder and went down to the barn.

His head ached and his knees felt weak but he led out the roan and strapped the bag in back of the saddle. Dave stepped into the saddle and rode out across the open country, away from the ranch, and Angus McGrath made no move to stop him.



THE SUN moved majestically down from his lofty vantage point above the world and silently sank behind the hills from where his hidden

fires streamed gold and pink against the sky. As they were banked for the night, the colors cooled to violet ash and the soft spring darkness flowed over the range.

But at the Trowbridge ranch there was gayety and bustle and many lights as the women hurried from the house to the barn, carrying laden platters and bowls.

Inside the barn, lanterns had been strung and the floor freshly swept. At one end, tables were piled high with food and, over at the side were chairs for the music makers; one-legged Billy Squires with his fiddle, Jasper Mooney with his accordion and old Mike Travers, whose still nimble fingers could pick his silver-toned banjo in a way that would set the heaviest feet to dancing.

Sam Trowbridge, his round, red face beaming with hospitality, was dispensing liquid cheer to the boys near the door. Dave stood with his back to the boards that formed the hay mow and beside him was Katey, sweet and grave in her mother's wedding dress.

Dave shook himself impatiently. This was his wedding night, the time he had been looking forward to for so long. Katey was waiting beside him and in a few minutes the frock-coated preacher would pronounce them man and wife.

He should be gay, excited, happy. Instead, there was a hard knot in his stomach that kept twisting tighter and a jumpy nervousness ran all through him. The picture of his father's face as he had last seen it kept coming into his mind; its shaded darkness with the fierce gleam of the eyes under the bushy brows.

Sam Trowbridge left his place by the door and came over to them. He looked at Dave's tense face and laid his hand on the boy's arm. "Don't you worry, Dave," he said low voiced. "I don't reckon your dad will try to stop this but if he does—" He nodded towards the group of men at

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the door. "They're all my neighbors. I promise you Angus McGrath will never bust up this wedding."

Katey slipped her cold hand into Dave's. "He'd never try to stop it now," she whispered.

Dave tried to smile at her but the tension within him seemed to lock his face. Sam's words hadn't eased it much. If his father and his riders came out looking for trouble there would be battle and murder and sudden death. And, aside from his fear, the picture of that grim, solitary man alone in the big house, stood out sharply in his mind.

The last of the women came in and took their expectant places along the wall. The preacher stepped out in front of a little table. Dave and Katey took their places before him. A hush came over the place as the preacher opened his black book and cleared his throat.

In the silence, the sudden hammer of a horse running full tilt came into the barn. Men looked at one another and became tense. The preacher paused.

The horse pounded to a stop and a moment later the door slid open and Angus McGrath stepped inside. His huge figure was dressed in his town clothes and a pearl-white Stetson was on his bushy head. Dave's startled eyes noticed that the huge stone jug hung from his hand.

Angus McGrath's eyes swept the room. Then he strode to the table behind the preacher and set the jug upon it.

Sam Trowbridge rolled forward, his cheerful face no longer smiling. "What brings you here, Angus?"

Angus McGrath looked down at him from under bushy brows. "Is it strange that a man should come to his son's wedding?" he asked.

Dave started forward, his eyes incredulous. "You mean—"

"I mean," said Angus and his deep voice rolled the syllables, "that I've been a blind fool. That I've learned that a man can be wrong and not know it until it is almost too late. That I was placing the value of some stinking sheep and a bit of land higher than the love of my son and the friendship of my neighbors."

He stopped and placed a hand on Dave's shoulder, so that his fingers bit

into the flesh. "You'll forgive me that blow, lad?"

Dave looked at him and nodded. Suddenly he couldn't speak for the lump in his throat.

There was a sudden trampling of horses' hoofs outside. One of the men sprang to the door and looked out. "It's a trick," he cried, slamming the door shut and leaping back into the room. "McGrath's riders are outside!"

Men crouched tensely, staring hard at McGrath.

Angus held up a big hand and his voice rang out. "It's my riders. But they're riding past—out of the basin. I'll never call them back. Tomorrow," he continued, "you can turn your sheep back into the strip. It will be open to all as it was before."

The tension went from the people and men grinned at each other.

Sam Trowbridge stuck out his meaty hand, his red face smiling in relief again. "I'm glad to see you're gettin' some sense in that thick head of yours, Angus."

"I reckon it's about time," said Angus as they shook.

The preacher cleared his voice and the buzz of talk quieted down. When the ceremony was over and Dave had kissed his wife for the first time, Angus stepped up to them.

"You'll not be leaving, lad? he asked anxiously. "You'll be coming back?"

"I reckon so," said Dave with a grin, "but you'll have to ask my wife."

"Of course we will," said Katey softly, "if you want us."

Angus put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her from his great height. "Maybe, lass," he said, "you can bring back the happiness and light that used to be there."

"I'll try," said Katey, her eyes misty.

Angus swung to the crowd. "Whoop her up!" he roared. "This isn't a funeral, it's a wedding!"

Billy Squires braced his peg leg and raised his fiddle. At the first notes of the dance, Angus slapped his hand resoundingly against the huge jug. "There's five gallons of good whiskey in there and I want to take it home empty . . . drink up!"



"I'm worried about Ma..."

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DEATH WAITS ON

Old Greasy Eagle accurately forecast young Wane's tragic homecoming to his bushwhacked, dying father, and to the sweetheart who had forgotten him. . . . But that wily medicine man locked his lips against the girl's dark secret—and the grim shadow which was clouding Wane's own future. . . . A red-blooded story of an owlhooter who could neither back-track nor sit tight—and didn't dare to look ahead!



CHAPTER ONE

Proddy Prodigal

OLD Greasy Eagle, the Papago Makai—which is to say a prophet and medicine man, sat cross-legged before the main doorway of the

House of the Four Winds. His sere face was as expressionless and blank as that of a dead man. But the sunken eyes, under his grizzled brows, were full of fire as he shifted his glance from the distance, where lightning flashes and the mutter of thunder came from great banks of boiling

THE PAPAGO By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Gripping Novelette of an Owlhooter's Last Trail



The outlaw reeled, a feathered shaft between his shoulder blades. . . .

clouds, to the contents of his medicine bag spread out before him.

He had a straight line traced there in the dust, an east and west line dotted with sacrificial objects. There were several arrow points, pointing west. These were to call the attention of Elder Brother to the need of directing the steps of the Lost One westward. There were prayer sticks, touched with ochre and tied with hair of the badger that never touches water. Thus his plea to the god to make the trail dry for the Lost One. And all the while his cadaverous body rocked

to the monotonous falsetto of his song:
"Elder Brother watch the trail

Where Lost One now is riding. . . ."

Greasy Eagle gave not the slightest heed to the horsemen who galloped up to the house hitchrack, alighted and came up the walk with singing spurs. Finding the *makai* in his way, the man halted before swerving around him, listening to the song with great show of scorn in his eyes. And that same scorn was in his voice when he spoke.

"Lost One! If you would call upon

Elder Brother, Wrinkled One, ask for strength for the old man who lies dying inside. And for a sign pointing to his murderer. Why ask for the return of one who was never a comfort to his father? Your medicine is not that strong, Greasy Eagle. Wane Fortune hasn't been heard of for over five years."

The *makai*, with an impulsive movement, swept up the objects into his medicine bag and climbed to his feet. By no means a small man, he had to look up to Stacy Fortune, the nephew of Old Justin Fortune—discoverer and developer of the Paloverde Mine—who hovered at death's door inside the great stone house.

"Pocked one," said Greasy Eagle and smiled inwardly as Stacy Fortune cringed, "you do not fool me. My medicine is strong. The Lost One is coming. He is almost here. You shall see."

The *makai* could see shame pull the hand up to partially cover the lean, lipless, horribly scarred and pitted face. Once, and not so many years before, Stacy had been a handsome, blonde giant, vainly prideful of his dudish clothes, his showy way on a horse, his connection with the rich mining man who had named him his heir upon breaking with his only son. In the delirium of his illness, he had broken the bonds that held his hands. And now even the Papagos turned away from him, shuddering.

Stacy Fortune flamed beneath the lash of the ancient *makai's* scorn. His right hand snapped to the butt of the gun at his hip. But the old Papago did not flinch. He seemed to smile, if so wrinkled and weathered a face can smile. Some claimed Greasy Eagle was a hundred years old. The *makai* admitted he didn't know. But he spoke of a priest, dead now seventy-odd years, who had come to baptize Greasy Eagle's seventh child—dead now of fever these thirty years.

Stacy Fortune didn't draw. Cursing bitterly, he tripped the *makai* and strode away. Nor did Greasy Eagle fire shrill curses after him. For, in falling, he spotted the moving speck on the far skyline. Grunting his satisfaction, he rose and broke into a lope he could hold all day. Yonder was the Lost One. The medicine was strong.

Wane Fortune, riding leisurely and

soaking up old scenes, met the old *makai* five miles east of the House of Four Winds. At sight of him, he yelled: "*Koli*—Old One!" and stepped down. He caught Greasy Eagle, lifted him aloft and looked him over. Then set him down. "You everlasting old fakir," he laughed. "Don't say you knew I was com—"

"Why you come home, Lost One?"

Bleakness touched Wane. "Damned if I know, Greasy Eagle. Why?"

The *makai* swelled. "My medicine strong. Elder Brother lead you here."

"Mebbyso, Greasy. Once I scoffed, but no more. Older I get, the less I know."

"Danger here, Lost One, for man who not know. Elder Brother tell you—by me."

"Go ahead, *Koli*. And while you're preaching, bow's my hard-shelled old dad, who kicked me out 'cause I wouldn't swap my cow ideas for the mining business? And my dear, stiff-necked cousin—Stacy? And—" his eyes grew soft, "beautiful Lupe?"

Greasy Eagle's face clouded. "*Osaka-kam*, your father, has bad sickness."

"Dad sick? What's the matter?"

"Bullet in back. And horse drag from stirrup. Sleep deep seven suns. Only Elder Brother wake up. You speak in his ear and devil quit him. Go quick, Lost One."



WANE went. Face gray, he rode the spurs across the tumbled hills to the House of Four Winds. At the hitchbar, he dropped rein, cuffed alkali from his shoulders as he strode up the graveled walk to the great pile of stone. He looked like a hard case. His denims were faded and torn. His three-day beard was gritty with dust. He needed water inside and out, yet he carried the same devil-may-care swagger that had sent him forth to the varied life of wanderer, cowpuncher, small cattleman and—outlaw.

Wane entered without knocking. Half blinded by the gloom of the hall, he sensed the figure standing there. He began: "I'm—" and was interrupted by a cry of joy.

"Wane! You're back!" Lupe came with a rush, into his waiting arms. For min-

utes, their hearts beat together, neither daring to speak. His eyes growing used to the inner gloom, he held her off, admiring her. She had been beautiful before, but now— Five years had added something gloriously feminine and lovely. Feasting on her dark-edged beauty, his mind relived the break with Justin Fortune.

They had quarreled about Wane's registering a cattle brand and undertaking the beef business on a range so precarious as this. Angry, Wane had stamped out, pausing for a word of sympathy from his frightened foster sister—Lupe. Something she said—he couldn't recall what—had made him take her into his arms and kiss her as brothers do not kiss their sisters. Just then Justin Fortune came out of his office.

"Get to your room, Lupe," he had thundered, then fixed Wane with a punishing glare. "All right, Wane, start explaining this—er—business."

"I love her," confessed Wane. "I aim to—"

"Love!" Justin Fortune had snorted. "What do you know of love, you puppy? This is impossible, you hear me? Have you thought that Lupe might be a Papago breed?"

"That is a lie!" Wane had snapped. "Greasy Eagle left her here without a word. You've admitted that. You know nothing about Lupe."

"I know you're insolent," Justin Fortune growled, and had drawn his palm crashingly across Wane's cheek.

Wane had bit his lip till it bled. Every fibre of his young manhood had screamed to strike back. All his decency had fought the impulse. He had stood shaken and trembling, but fully master of himself. "That's the finisher, Father," he had said, icily formal. "I'm leaving. I'll come back later—for Lupe."

"Go ahead!" had raged the angry sire. "And don't come back for Lupe or anything else!"

Wane had lost no time in clearing out. And now he was back—only to see Lupe, not to take her with him. For he had no place to take her. And—he had been goaded past all human patience. He had drawn his gun on one who made guns his gods. He had slain and taken tempo-

rary refuge with outlaws who dubbed him the Cholla Kid. What right did a hunted man have to even think about a girl like Lupe?

"My dear," the girl was whispering, "your father—the doctor says he cannot live. He has not spoken since—since—"

"Where is he?"

"Here." She led the way into the long, high-ceilinged master bedroom.

The instant Wane crossed the threshold he could feel the impact of that sturdy personality that was Justin Fortune.

CHAPTER TWO

Death and Its Outriders

THE Chief, or Osakakam to the Papagoes, lay in the heavy walnut bed, under the large picture of the mother Wane couldn't remember. His mop of still-dark hair spread over the pillow like a black frame to the pallor of his long, sharp-featured face. He stared unmoving into the ceiling. His chest seemed not to move. He looked like a corpse.

Wane went to the bedside and, frightened by the stillness of his sire, took the emaciated wrist. There he found a faint pulse. "He's alive," he said, as if surprised.

The sick man stirred. "He hears you, Wane," breathed Lupe. "Speak to him."

"Can you hear me, Chief?" It was the name everybody had used for Justin Fortune since Wane could remember. "It's Wane. I've come back home, never knowing I'd find you like this. What happened, Chief?"

Justin Fortune moaned, half turned and opened his sunken eyes, as a man opens his eyes when awakened by some stunning disturbance. "Wane!" It was terribly weak, little more than a whisper. "Wane, my boy." His thin hands fluttered out to grasp Wane's shirt. "I knew you'd come, son. I—I had to tell you I—I was wrong, son. Too—too severe. No tolerance. No understanding. I've regretted so often that hour when I—" He paused, gasping for the breath to continue.

Stacy Fortune tiptoed in and affected a smile as the old man called his name.

"Stacy! Where are you, Stacy? Fetch my will from the secret drawer in the

right wall closet. And hurry—Stacy—”

Stacy blinked, turned about and left the room. In a few moments he was back, a strained look on his pocked face. “The will,” he announced, “is not in the secret drawer, Uncle Justin.”

The mining man seemed confused in his mind. “Not—not there? It has never been anyplace else, not since I drew it. Who could have taken it? No one knows of the drawer except you and Lupe—ah-h-h-h.” He sighed deeply and relaxed. “No matter. When it is found, destroy it. You all hear me say it. My son Wane is to have half of the estate. Stacy and Lupe will share equally the other half.”

A tremor seemed to run through him and he bowed up in the middle. He was then seized with a fit of coughing that ended in a startling gush of crimson. His eyes were open and they were glassy.

Lupe cried: “The doctor. Get the doctor!”

“Where is the doctor?” demanded Wane, seizing his father’s hand and finding no response in it.

“He’s sleeping,” said Stacy. “He was up with Uncle all night. I’ll get him.”

When he returned, some moments later, he had the gray-sleep-drugged doctor with him. The medico went directly to Justin Fortune, examined him briefly and pulled the sheet up over his still, pale face.

Lupe sobbed.

There was an aching lump in Wane’s throat as he said: “I guess I shouldn’t have excited him the way I did.”

“I’ll say you shouldn’t have,” replied Stacy. “When you left, you weren’t especially interested in what your going would do to the old man. And you promised you’d never come back.”

“I promised I’d come back once more,” said Wane, looking at the miracle that had turned Lupe into a beautiful woman. “If my coming hastened my father’s death, I’m sorry.”

“You needn’t be, son,” said the doctor, who had been brought out from Tucson to attend the stricken man. “It was an aneurism, brought on by a bullet injury of the pulmonary artery. I have expected the rupture of the tumor at any moment. The wonder of it is that he lasted half as long as he did. The bullet wound would

have killed most men, not to mention the aneurism, the broken thigh, arm and shoulder, skull fracture and major shock—”

“Somebody laid for him,” said Lupe fiercely. “When I find out who it was—”

“He quarreled with Greasy Eagle,” muttered Stacy. “The old magician wanted all the miners to be off for a week, celebrating the *na’vaita* by getting drunk on sahuaro wine. It has been their habit for centuries, which uncle knew, but the work has not been going well and he refused. That refusal cost him his life.”

“I doubt that,” said Wane. “The taking of life fills a Papago with sad thoughts of waste and of the displeasure of Elder Brother. The man who has killed heads immediately for the Santa Cruz River, to purify himself with sweating and bathing and fasting. It should not be hard to find who has recently departed.”

Stacy snorted. “Oh, that stuff. The younger Papagoes don’t believe in that superstitious drivel.”



“T HOSE who don’t believe in it,” insisted Wane, “do not believe in the business of brewing and drinking of sahuaro wine to bring rain. They never would have killed the Chief to make the festival possible.”

Stacy flushed and his eyes were hard as he looked Wane up and down. “All right,” he snapped. “You advance a better theory of who killed him—and why.”

“I intend to,” said Wane quietly. “What about that will, Stacy? Where is it?”

“Are you trying to infer that I took it out of that drawer?”

Wane nodded toward Lupe. “Knowing that Lupe would never steal, I must assume that you took it. You better get it back, Stacy, so that we can all witness its destruction.”

“You go to hell!” flared Stacy. “Your game is plain, Wane. I wouldn’t put it past you to have snooped around here and taken it yourself. Like a buzzard, death drew you to the feast—”

Wane let him have it—a straight, hard blow to the chin that dumped him. They had left the room of death, closing the door. In the gloom of the hall, Stacy lay

there, shaking his head and stroking his jaw, staring up at his angered cousin. He sat up and rage convulsed him and his hand went to the gun he carried high on his right hip.

Lupe gasped, leaped to Wane's side and clung to him. "No, Stacy," she begged. "Not that. It has gone too far already." "Let him pull it," said Wane with chill gentleness. "He needs to be taught manners."

"Shame on you both," scolded Lupe. "We must try to get along, now that the Chief has left us with the Paloverde, and the House of Four Winds."

An Indian servant came in. "Mist' Watson out door, wish see Mist' Stacy."

Stacy said, spearing Wane with a virulent glare as he came to his feet, "You haven't heard the last of this, my dear cousin."

"Neither have you," said Wane, and watched him go out.

With the anger drained out of him, Wane found himself sorry for having struck his cousin, sorry for having returned at all. What had it served him? He had taken the last of Justin Fortune's strength and had watched him die. For long he had nursed a longing to see Lupe again, but now that he had seen her he found himself a little in awe of her womanliness that was strange to him, more than ever conscious of his inability to come to her with clean hands and a promise of any sort of security.

For him there seemed nothing but to fade deeper into the Papagueria, whose secrets he knew and whose people he understood. But that could wait until he had found his father's killer and settled with him.

"If some Papago killed him," he mused, "Greasy Eagle will know."

"Greasy Eagle knows much that he doesn't tell," Lupe said quietly. "Such as who I am, and who my parents—"

"What difference does it make, Lupe?" "Your father seemed to think it important, Wane."

"I meant what I told you then—I mean it now." He watched the dimple deepen in her olive cheek. "You are more beautiful. And me, I haven't the right to speak."

Feeling surged up in her. "What is it, Wane? What's the matter?"

"You will have to remember the good in me, Lupe. There is much bad to overbalance it now. At least, that's the way the law looks at it."

She smiled at him. "It will always be easy for me to think of the good," she said. "And to forgive you the bad. I have never forgotten your promise to return once, for me. But the years stretched out and I left my girlhood behind. You didn't come and—" She fell silent, her eyes cast down.

Wane gasped. "You mean, Lupe, that you are married?"

"Not married, Wane. Promised. I promised to marry Stacy when Chief's sickness was over. Only an hour ago I promised, never knowing that you would return."

"Stacy!" Something like horror swept Wane, thinking of that horribly pitted face. True, it was new to him and maybe people got used to such things. "But you don't—Do you love him, Lupe?"

"I shall serve him," she said resignedly. "That is wrong. You can break that promise."

"If I broke it, Wane, you would know that any promise I made you would be worthless. I shall keep my promise. And I want you to make me one."

"What?"

"Not to harm Stacy."

He promised, mumbled some excuse and moved toward the open door. Through it came an undertone of voices; then Stacy's angry retort.

"Trouble or no trouble, Baldy, the In-

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dians don't get off for that sahuaro wine bust. Tell 'em the Chief lies here dead and that his last words were for them to work the mine."

Wane stepped to the porch. "Tell them," he countermanded, "that they can get off and have their celebration."

The two men whirled around to face him, the tall man with the ugly pocked face and the squatty, bald mine boss—Baldy Watson. Stacy growled: "What right have you—a man who knows nothing of mining and cares less, to interfere in this business?"

"The right of my new interest in the Paloverde, Stacy. And the right of two, maybe three votes to your one. And you, Baldy, will take your orders from me, not from Stacy. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," gulped the stolid Cornishman. "Just so we understand who's boss."

Wane struck out for the barn and corals to get a horse. Once he looked back. The two men on the porch were staring after him, as men might stare after a sand devil that had swept away their hats. And at the door, Wane saw the pale blot of Lupe's face and cursed the day he had wasted at Arivaca.

CHAPTER THREE

Medicine Man

WHEN Wane had corraled the weary animal he had ridden in on and had galloped away on a fresh mount, the two men on the porch went along the road to the Paloverde Mine, around the point of the black hill, through dust stirred by the lumbering, mule-drawn ore wagons.

"Baldy," said Stacy, "a no-good saddle bum comes back and upsets our whole world. With the old man sure to die, I was sitting pretty here. The will left me two-thirds, Lupe one-third. Lupe has promised to marry me, which meant I'd run things here my way. Now this—"

"Bod," muttered Baldy. "Werra bod."

"He hadn't been here an hour," Stacy went on, "until he smacked me on the jaw and dumped me on the floor. Nobody can do that to me, Baldy, and not pay up."

"You have troubles between you, me bve," growled the Cornishman, "and I

have to jump when you both crack the whip. I do not like it. Methinks I go down to Tucson and get droonk."

Stacy grabbed him. "Please don't let me down, Baldy. I'm depending on you. I promise I'll have all this changed. By Godfrey, I'll change it if I have to shoot it out with him. That's what he wants."

"What the bye wants, ye'd be a fool to grant him, Stacy. He would prove the faster and the straighter, ye may be werra sure o' thot. Unless—"

"What?"

"When I worked down at Oro Blanco, me bye, I met a bold fellow—Minto Gore. He liked his cup of grog and we became good friends. There was a price on his head, because of the speed of his gunhand. A killer, they call him. He belongs to a band of brigands they call the Road Runners. For a price, me bye, he could be lured here to do a job and clear up the bloody confusion."

"How much price?"

"What do you care? It comes oot of the mine, don't it?"

"How do we get him here?"

"Let the Indians have their droonk, Stacy me bye. I'll ride doon and have one in Tucson. On the way bock, I'll stop at the Trimble Mine and make all the arrangements."

And so it was arranged. And while the details were being worked out between them, Wane was loping toward the *ki* of Old Greasy Eagle, at *Voali*—Little Pond, seven miles west. Here a hole in the rock seldom caught enough water to supply one family. Here in a house of wattle and mud, with a spreading ramada before it, Greasy Eagle's daughter looked after the *makai's* wants as well as a rather feeble eighty-five-year-old woman can. And here Wane found the old magician sitting in the shade, still sweating from his long run.

Greasy Eagle grinned at sight of the Lost One, for here again he had drawn the line and laid out the arrow points, making medicine that would draw Wane to him when he had seen his father. As Wane took a seat beside him, laying aside his hat and rolling two cigarettes, the *makai* said:

"Crow fly over house. Make wing flap. Cry loud many time for Greasy Eagle to hear. Caw! Caw! Caw! Chief he die and spirit go see Elder Brother." He went

through the motions of flapping wings. "Chief plenty dead now, no?"

"Dead," conceded Wane. "But I talked with him. That's good. Somebody shot him and that's bad. What Papago boy have trouble with Chief, Greasy Eagle?"

"All Papago have good heart to Big Chief *Folchoonk*. Good friend."

"What Papago boy go away to be purified after killing?" insisted Wane, which started the *makai* to muttering unintelligibly, as if angered. For moments he puffed his cigarette awkwardly. Then Greasy Eagle intoned:

"Papago boy not kill long time now. Me think pretty soon kill."

"Kill man who killed Chief?" Getting information out of this old medicine maker was like pulling sound teeth.

Greasy Eagle nodded vigorously. "Me think Papago boy kill the *kooi*, the rattle-snake, that kill *Osakakam*—the Chief."

"Who was it, Greasy Eagle?"



THE *makai's* sunken eyes watched the curl of smoke from his cigarette. He began to speak. "*Osakakam* old man. No wail in *ki* when old man die. Old chief die, new chief take place. Greasy Eagle work magic, bring you home. Now you be chief. Good. But you watch out. White man try kill you too."

"What white man?"

The *makai* swayed a little as he sat. His eyes were closed. His voice came almost like a song. "*Osakakam* come up from mine, where he stay after Papago miner go home. Big rock tumble down mine, nearly kill him. White man throw rock down. *Osakakam* come out plenty mad. Nobody him see. Get on horse to ride home. Shot come from bush. Chief fall. Foot catch in stirrup. Horse drag him home. You watch out all time. Both sides, front, back. Watch for man with bright *hoo* on his shirt."

"Star?" It nailed down Wane's interest. "Sheriff."

"No sheriff."

"Ah—ranger."

"M-m-m-m."

It left Wane with an uneasy gnawing in his stomach. His trail was no open book to any lawman. As far as he knew, there

was nothing definite to tie the Cholla Kid to Wane Fortune. Yet his respect for the icy nerved men who carried ranger law into the hinterlands of Arizona was great enough to leave him with a feeling of impending disaster, and to attach more than a little importance to the warnings of this living corpse with the uncanny wisdom. He left his tobacco and papers and rode back toward the mine.

Halfway there, Lupe met him. She bestrode a horse with none of the awkwardness of most women. She was excited, pleased.

"A telephone message came from Arivaca," she called. "I talked with Ranger Hampton Burch. He'll be here in a few days. He's on the trail of the outlaw—The Cholla Kid. And he was very interested when I told him the Chief was dead from an assassin's bullet. Said he believed the killing might have been done by the Cholla Kid. He's going to make headquarters at the mine and investigate. Isn't that fine?"

"Yeah—fine," said Wane, and his mind turned at once to points deeper in the heart of the mystery known of the Papagueria. At *Vaipia*, *Aupa* or *Vavuk* he was known and would be made welcome. And the strange telegraph of the Papagoes would warn him if there was danger on the trail.

Lupe noticed his moodiness and was troubled. Their trip home was made in silence. Wane took the ponies and attended to unsaddling while Lupe went inside to supervise the supper. Wane washed himself luxuriantly at the pipe that came from the developed spring to the horse trough and was drying himself on his large bandanna when Stacy Fortune came out of the barn.

"Well," Stacy said, "when our precious Papago miners laid down their tools tonight, the Paloverde closed down for a week. And with the smelter crying for ore and offering bonuses."

"Just as well it does close down," said Wane, "out of courtesy to the Chief."

"That sounds well, coming from you."

"You don't learn easy, do you, Stacy? I'm sorry now that I struck you, even if you did ask for it. Now here you go asking for it again. Quit it."

"Saw you riding in from the west," said Stacy, unimpressed. "With Lupe. I sup-

pose you'd been out pumping that old fakir. What did he tell you?"

"That a white man, not a Papago, killed the Chief."

"And you both swallowed it, hook, line and sinker, eh?"

"Lupe wasn't there. She rode out to meet me, having just talked with Ranger Hampton Burch."

"Burch? What's he want?"

"He's going to help smoke out Justin Fortune's murderer. And by the way, Lupe told me you were going to marry her. Let me be the first to congratulate you. She's a fine girl."

"Always were sweet on her, weren't you, Cousin? And she on you. Too bad."

His cousin smiled unpleasantly, then turned toward the house.

Wane donned his shirt and followed, his mind a whirlpool of savage thoughts.



JUSTIN FORTUNE'S funeral took place in the afternoon of the day the *navaita* was scheduled to begin at sunset. The place was the top of *Hotai Kavolik*—the red rock hill Justine Fortune had loved to climb for the view across the Papago country. The grave had literally been chiseled out of the base rock.

A lot of people came out of a desolate, sparsely-peopled land to pay their last respects to the *osakam* of the House of Four Winds. Neighbors, drawn by the mysterious whispering of the sands, traveling as far as seventy-five miles to attend. Parched and colorless prospectors who had helped Justin Fortune pioneer this mineral belt. Squawmen from the Papago Placers. Mexican and Basque shepherders from the Altar, the Santa Cruz and the Gila. A saloonman from Nogales. A judge from Tucson, who had prospected with the dead man, years before. Cowpunchers. Papagos from a dozen rancheries.

Some were rich, one Basque reputed to be worth a million, but mostly these people owned only what they bestrode or wore on their backs. The mission priest, from San Xavier, had been a frequent visitor here, drinking Justin Fortune's wine and arguing philosophy. He sang the mass and read the service, undisturbed by the splendidly

mounted and heavily armed men who rode to graveside, took a hurried look at the dead man and quietly departed.

Ranger Hampton Burch closed his eyes, for while these men were wanted, they had enjoyed sanctuary here and a funeral was a poor place to smash tradition.

The voice of the priest droned on. Now the coffin was lowered, the lid sealed and the rocky soil shoveled over it. Lupe sobbed. The priest prayed in Latin. Greasy Eagle whined a death song of the Papagoes. A feeble old mining man from Oro Blanco blew a kiss at the departed, as if envious. Wane looked in vain for Stacy. Already the folk were winding down the trail, preparatory to departing.

That night the big house was stifling and still. Wane sat with Lupe, both overcome by this new emptiness. Justin Fortune had taken something with him. From the arcade came the mutterings of Ranger Burch and Stacy Fortune, talking over the murder. The eerie minors of the singing Papagoes, at the *kihim* down the draw, rose and fell on the night breeze.

"Come," said Wane, and took her by the hand. "Let's go to the *kuki*."

The dancing place was before the *kuki*, or big house, and was already crowded. Strings of eagle feathers fluttered from the east and west poles. Two *makai* sat making their magic before the small, single fire. Dancers, men and women, circled the fire, the hands joined and their voices uplifted in the chants. Others, standing, sitting or lying outside the circle, clapped in time to the beat. One song after another, the list seemingly endless. It would continue this night and the next, after which the *navait* wine would be potent and all would get drunk. Then, if the medicine had been stout, the rain would come and there would be corn and squash, beans and melons.

It hypnotized Lupe out of her mood. Even Wane, used to it, found the rhythm dispelling his somber thoughts. From the door of the *kuki*, Greasy Eagle motioned them inside, where the Keeper of the Smoke and other *makai* blew on their rain crystals to cool them, symbolic of cooling the sky for rain.

The room was fetid and reeked with the smoke from the small fire. About the fire-hole were tall jars of sahuaro wine, which

gave off the sourish smell of fermentation.

Greasy Eagle sat them down and pushed in between them. "Singing strong and good whispering in wine," he murmured. "Rain come sure if everybody bring to-bacco."

Wane passed over his sack.

Greasy Eagle put Lupe's hand in Wane's. "Now you take Lupe," he said, "you be Lost One no more. You be *Osa-kakam* at House of Four Winds, no?"

"The coyote," said Wane, "mates and raises young, but that's not for Lupe. Man makes coyote run. Me, too. No, I will not be here long, Greasy Eagle."

"One time," said the *makai*, "Elder Brother tell coyote stop running, change to dog and lead easy life. Coyote have to fight for easy living. You fight too, or run." He left them then and, with their eyes smarting, they followed. Tiring of watching the dancing, they headed for home, Greasy Eagle calling after them.

"Come tomorrow. I tell about fight."

They moved through the warm moonlight, Lupe clinging to Wane's arm. In silence they returned to the House of the Four Winds.

Lupe left Wane and went to open the kitchen door. There she paused, frozen by the surprising pantomime. Melinda, the Negro cook, stood before the pantry, carver in hand. Behind her cowered her two Papago kitchen girls. Melinda croaked: "Bress de Lawd, Missy, run fo' he'p!"

At the stove, a slim, wickedly-smiling man gnawed at a chunk of meat, fished from a pot. He had reckless eyes and an insolent, frightening laugh. "Don't bother about no help, ma'am. I'm a friend of the boss—Stacy Fortune. He sent me here to—" He hitched his gun and the assurance of Stacy's hospitality rode his alkali-powdered shoulders. "Now that I've et, how about somethin' nice to wash 'er down with?"

"There's water in the pail behind you."

Again that laugh, his interest hardening as he stared at Lupe, his smile exceedingly sharp. He wiped greasy hands on his pant legs, wiped his sleeve across his lips. "Sa-a-ay," he crooned, edging closer.

Lupe stood frozen there, frightened but commanding calm and scorn. "You keep

away from me," she warned. "You're building up trouble, if you don't."

Amusement shook him and he took the dare, taking swift strides to reach her. This one, Lupe suddenly knew, was old in wickedness and immune to bluff.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Command

MINTO GORE caught Lupe, fastened his arms about her and waited to see what she would do. Her jaw hardened and her right arm flashed. Her palm spatted against his stubbled cheek. He chuckled and tried to kiss her. With a violent twist, she broke away. Then Melinda screamed, launched herself with brandishing blade. He stopped the Negro woman with a smooth pistol draw. Then Lupe screamed.

Wane heard those screams, broke into a run. He popped through the doorway.

Gore, sensing him at his back, spun around and looked into Wane's gun muzzle.

"Holster it!" Wane ordered, his hard fury still under high check rein. "What is it, Lupe?"

Melinda, not Lupe, answered him, with a rush of vindictiveness.

Gore dropped his gun into leather, said coldly to Melinda: "Next time you draw a shiv on me, I'll gut shoot yuh, savvy? . . . H'are yuh, Cholla. What's your stake here?"

Their glances clashed. Too well they knew one another, and there had never been any love lost between them. His eyes flat slits of light, Wane said:

"Get out! And don't come back."

Gore's lips curled. "You go to hell, Cholla. How do you rate the high horse?" His head canted and he listened to the lifted voice of Ranger Burch, coming from the living quarters. And what the lawman said was of interest to Wane:

"That means I've got to clear out, Stacy. This messenger says a lone outlaw held up the La Osa Ranch, killed a vaquero, pistol whipped the manager, and robbed the safe. The man was masked but an Indian witness believes it was Minto Gore. It means the Road Runners are opening up again. I've got to hit their trail."

"I think you'll gain by waiting over till morning, Burch," Stacy's voice held a hint of mystery. "I've just obtained some fresh information. If it's right, you won't leave here empty handed."

Their voices lowered as they sat to discuss it. Minto Gore grinned at Wane, stepped around him and went out into the night, where the coyotes were wailing brokenly.

Lupe stared wistfully at Wane's dark, worried face. In a small way, she understood what was fermenting in him. He was thinking it out. He was worried and lonely. Some woman, she thought, could comfort him. Her heartbeat quickened and she swayed toward him. And then she remembered that she had promised to marry Stacy. Turning without hearing the grumbling of the cook, she let herself into the hall from which gave doors into the sleeping rooms of the big house.

There was no sleep in Wane and he went to the shaded side of the storehouse and sat down.

Presently boots echoed along the porch arcade, with the faint chiming of spurs. Two cigar coals glowed in the gloom and Wane heard the muffled exchange of "good night." He knew it was the ranger who tossed his weed away and passed through the outer door of a bedchamber, and Stacy Fortune who stood smoking at the corner. And then, like a ghost, Minto Gore, the gunman came gliding from the shadows. Low words, utterly unintelligible to Wane, passed between those two. Then Stacy hurled his cigar away and went inside.

Gore stood posted there, like a graven statue, blending with the under gloom of the arcade. Near Wane something stirred, like the sudden emergence of a packrat or a cactus mouse. The faintest sibilance of breath split the night. "Ps-s-s-st!"

Silent as a snake, Greasy Eagle came wriggling along the ground, until he paused beside Wane. He was changed, and in no subtle way. In his hair, still no grayer than that of a man of sixty, was caught a pair of eagle feathers. Some rattlesnake was whipped to his arms, whispering as he moved. His skinny body was naked save for a loincloth and across his back was slung a small bow and a quiver of arrows.

"Stone not get cool," he whispered. "No good. Night *pi-kuukatsh*. Bad. Coyote not hunt; only wait for man to die. Me come show you how fight night snakes that not rattle. Ss-s-s-s! Look!"

♦ ♦ ♦

HIS long finger pointed and Wane noticed that he was daubed with ochre—circles around his eyes and mouth, vertical slashes on his cheeks. As he had in a dim and distant time, Greasy Eagle had painted for war. And his keen old eyes were watching Minto Gore glide along the arcade.

Wane whispered: "Maybe your medicine is stronger than any of us know, Greasy Eagle; maybe not. But if you've looked ahead and seen what was sure one day to happen, you can't help me much. Watch that devil and see that he don't bust in on Lupe." He rose, and the *makai* rose with him.

"Wait," said Greasy Eagle. "What you talk? You growl like thunder at the Girl Child of the Falling Star."

"To hell with you," muttered Wane. "If you're a *makai* and can see anything, you know what's the matter. I want to look at that buzzard when he opens Lupe's door."

He walked away, taking advantage of the shadows, rounded the corner of the house and moved along the arcade toward the front door. And then he saw the ponies racked at the hitchbar. Five leggy animals, wearing leather glittery with conchas. Wane caught his breath, halting. He knew those horess and their owners. The Road Runners!

Wane slipped to the front door. Through a screen, he could see Baldy Watson, the Cornish mine boss, standing in the glow of the light from the living room. He could hear Stacy talking, without making out the words. Changing his mind about going through the house, he continued on down the arcade, rounding two corners and pausing. Up ahead, Minto Gore was stealthily reaching for the knob of Lupe's door. Wane's voice was low and steady and final.

"I told you to raise dust, Gore."

The man's hand snapped back and he

turned slowly. "Don't come none of that on me, Cholla. Your high-an'-mighty ways don't sit so well on me."

It was "made" talk and it came to Wane that this killer's game was not Lupe, but that he was merely using her for bait. Stacy's brought him here to kill me, he thought, and spat his last order: "Head toward the barn and your horse, Gore. Get out!"

"If I don't, Cholla?"

"I'll kill you, Gore."

Coyotes broke into an eerie jabbering, their cacophony dulling the two flat bursts of pistol fire. Wane swayed a little as a bullet burned his side, chest high. But otherwise he stood planted with his feet well apart, shooting from the hip, and continuing to shoot after Minto Gore had staggered back and ceased to fire.

Wane shot him again and he went down, howling. Then he was up, wheeling madly through the first door that came to his hand. And Wane marked that it was Ranger Hamp Burch's door, and would have laughed at that except for the sudden mass jangle of spurs rounding the front corner. The Road Runners!

Lupe's door opened and she stood there, Justin Fortune's shotgun gripped and level. Wane took quick steps toward her. "Get back inside, Lupe," he growled.

"I am afraid of nothing," she protested, but did as he said. The door clicked closed and Wane flattened against the wall. They were coming from both ways.

CHAPTER FIVE

War and Peace

THEY came from the right and they came from the left, their guns glinting from reflected moonlight. And Wane's form was dark against the whitish *tufa* wall and they saw him standing there, cried their warnings and scattered out. "That dirty ranger!" one yelled. "Down him, boys!"

"That ain't Burch," roared another. "It's Cholla."

"One's as bad as the other. Git him!" They were taking cover, kneeling behind the arcade roof supports. Five guns smashing echoes against the barren hills.

Wane felt the sting of two bullets at the same instant. went to the arcade floor to escape the leaden sleet. They must have believed him dead, for two stepped into full view. Wane killed one, dropped the other who scuttled behind the upright, screaming curses. In the momentary lull, while the rest reloaded, there was a sound like an enraged hornet, followed by an audible *click*. One of the outlaws reeled out from his covert, spun and fell. A feathered shaft juttied between his shoulder blades. Another fell, arrow spitted. The one Wane had winged tried to run for it, dragging one leg. Wane dropped him kicking.

Four of the five were down and the fifth was running, dodging like an antelope rabbit, with Greasy Eagle ghosting after him with bowstring drawn taut. A silence, painful to the ears, succeeded the hell of gunfire.

Across the pane of Lupe's darkened room a light flashed. A door closed softly and through the stillness Stacy Fortune's voice echoed. "Lupe! What have you done with that gun? What were you shooting at?"

Her soft reply brought him to the outer door. It opened and he stood there, not a handful of yards from Wane, who stood reloading his Colt. He held a lantern in his hand and its rays fell upon the thin line of blood coursing Wane's face. Also, it showed the curl of Stacy's lips.

"You," he said, with massive scorn. "I might have known. I could smell trouble the minute you hit the place. And now—" His eyes flicked to the four sprawled bodies, half in and half out of moonlight at the edge of the arcade. "Now you indulge your lust for killing by shooting men who asked nothing but the chance to replace our lazy and mutinous Papago miners. I'm ashamed—"

At that moment, there were footsteps in the arcade and two men came swinging around the corner—Ranger Hampton Burch and the mine boss, Baldy Watson.

The Cornishman halted abruptly, almost recoiling from the four bodies sprawled there. He muttered. "Will ye look! Dead—all dead. And will ye listen to him thot stands with the lantern. He's ashamed, he says. I'd think he'd well be."

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It shook Stacy. "You back-biting devil!" he yelled with the shrillness and thoughtlessness of hysteria. "If you've been shooting off your mouth about me, I'll see you hung. Yes, hung for the murder of Justin Fortune."

Not until then did Wane notice that Watson's hands were manacled behind him. Stacy saw it too and it drew his face white as paper in the lantern light.

The ranger said: "It's no good, Stacy. The fat's in the fire now."

Stacy gulped, drew himself up. "I—I don't know what you mean," he said too loudly. "But I can tell you one thing you probably don't know. Here—" he leveled a shaking finger at Wane—"here's the man you're looking for . . . the killer! My dear cousin, the Cholla Kid. He's been away for five years and the description fits him."

Burch paused there—a tall, somber man with heavy shoulders and heavy legs and a voice that carried all the authority in the world. His lips were wide and stern and his eyes gray and impersonal as death. "That right, Wane Fortune?"

"That's right, Burch." He tossed his gun to the arcade flagstones, with a gesture of finality. "I killed John Prentiss, of Prentiss and Borland—cattlemen who believe they were born gods and that all other men are fit only for slaves to lick their boots. I filed on land they think is part of their empire. They tried to run me off, and succeeded. Prentiss crowded me too far. I killed him and rode to join the Road Runners. They were snakes and I rode with them only long enough to be saddled with the name of Cholla Kid. Whatever their sins are worth, I'm ready to pay. I'm tired of running."

The ranger nodded. "We know more about you now than we did, Wane," he said, not unkindly. "You'll be interested to know that Borland is in the pen at Yuma, for just such practices as they practiced on you. He admitted that you were justified in killing Prentiss. Self-defense, he called it. And when Minto Gore ducked into my room, a few minutes ago, I was ready for him. He was hit and I made him believe he was dying. He coughed up plenty to ease his warped conscience—among other things the fact

that you were a limp in the hoof to the bold Road Runners. And that Stacy Fortune and Baldy Watson ribbed it up to have the Road Runners kill Wane."

"It's a lie!" screamed Stacy.

"Squeal, you rat!" came the muffled voice of Minto Gore, from the darkened bedroom.

The ranger grinned. "No, boys, Minto isn't bad hurt. He'll live to hang. And you, Stacy, why did you send for the Road Runners, if not to kill Wane, which they were not big enough to do?"

"Same reason I sent for you, Burch. To bring you face to face with the men you wanted. And to collect the reward."



BURCH smiled. "You sent for me to meet them face to face, eh? Weren't thinking about what they might do to me, were you? Weren't thinking about turning in your cousin, having learned who he was through your outlaw connections? Well, I am not here to judge you, Stacy. I am here to take you, brought here by the message sent

me by Greasy Eagle, the old Papago makai. . . ."

"Oh no, you don't!" Stacy's pocked face convulsed. He dropped the lantern, extinguishing it. His hand flashed, came away with a gun that flamed. His first slug took Wane in the meaty muscle of the upper left arm, knocking him back and down. Stacy shot again, at the ranger this time. But Burch was sending his own powerful body curvetting aside and he was drawing, lining and firing, all in one coordinated burst. His bullets smashed through the open doorway and into the black room beyond. But Stacy was gone and the ranger was after him. Wane got up, gritting his teeth from pain of that flesh wound, reclaimed his gun.

Out front, there was a single shot, then the musical twang of a bow. Wane spoke Lupe's name, his heart suddenly so full it left an aching lump in his throat. But she did not answer and he knew she was no longer in her embattled room. Presently a dark shadow came into the arcade and Greasy Eagle was beside Wane.

The old fellow's long front teeth reflected the moonlight. He still clung to

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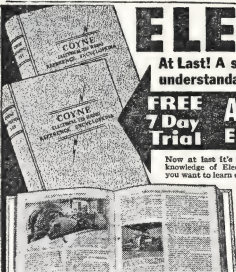
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his rawhide-covered bow, but quiver was empty. He seemed to have taken on stature and flesh, as if this night had restored some of his long-lost youth.

"Stone blow cool now, *Osakakam*," he murmured, using the title of leadership always applied to his father before him. "Rattlesnake man, with pock face, he crawl no more. Peace come again to House of Four Winds. What you think about Lupe now, friend? What you think about settle down and raise *ali*—what you call baby?"

Wane shook off his pain, laughing and clapping the *makai* on his bony shoulder. "You scheming old rascal, that's the question you've been leading up to ever since you started making medicine to get me home. I think Lupe's mighty fine, Greasy Eagle. To settle down here with her would be about the nicest thing I could think of. If—if they let me."

"They let you," grunted the *makai*, making no effort to conceal his joy. "Man who wear star on chest promise. You go to Lupe now?"

"I reckon. Where is she?"

The old man led him out from under the arcade, pointed to the top of the *hotai kavolik*—the rocky hill where Justin Fortune lay avenged. She stood there in the moonlight—a scintillant statue, tall, slender, terribly alone. "You go," whispered the old *makai*. "Greasy Eagle lay medicine fire there. You light. Sit there with Lupe, read this—" He pressed a flat package into Wane's hand. It was wrapped in faded calico and tied with fine thong. The *makai* yawned. "Me very tired. Go back to *kuki*, cool stone some more. Another sun get very drunk on *navait*, dance like hell. Then rain come and all *makai* sleep long time. Good night, *Osakakam*."

Wane took a long time to climb the low hill, for a weakness had come to his body and he was knowing his first shyness of Lupe. Gaining the top, he bore directly to the pile of leaves and twigs and small sticks that Greasy Eagle had laboriously carried there. He lit the pile and as the flame crackled through it, he sat down. Lupe came to him then.

He drew her down beside him, handed her the package and watched her unroll

DEATH WAITS ON THE PAPAGO

calico that crumbled in her fingers. Inside was a flat wallet. In the pockets were letters addressed to Giovanni and Edda Manini, mostly from business firms in Tucson and El Paso. There were papers attesting the sale of a trading post at Arivaipa to Giovanni Manini. There were yellowback gold notes totaling nearly a thousand dollars. And then there was the photograph posed in a Tucson gallery. A proud looking man with fierce mustaches, sitting in a chair holding an infant. A young mother standing beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder. That mother, save for her ornate lace dress, was the image of Lupe now. Under the picture was the caption:

"Giovanni and Edda
Baby Madeline"

"Madeline." Wane ran it over his tongue. "A nice name, but I like Lupe better, don't you?"

"You got it from Greasy Eagle," she sighed. "I knew he knew about me. My—my father and mother, Wane. What became of them?"

"We will ask him, after *navaita*," he answered. "The road to Arivaipa was hard then, as it is now. Many roads lead from it, dead-end roads that lead only to heat and thirst and—death. It was a long time ago, Lupe."

His arm went about her waist and her head went to his shoulder. The tiny fuel supply burned out and the moonlight was soft as the echoes of the renewed singing, at the *navaita*. The frogs and crickets were at work again and the coyotes were crying. Mystery pressed in around those two sitting there. Mystery of life and death. Mystery of the Papagoes and their *makai*. Mystery of love.

THE END

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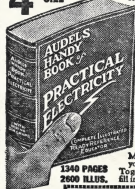
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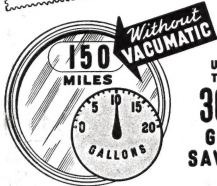
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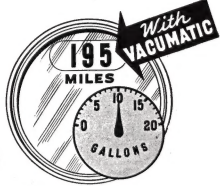
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